JASON SPERB

Disney's MOST NOTORIOUS Film

RACE, CONVERGENCE,
AND THE HIDDEN
HISTORIES OF
Song of the South

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SONG OF THE SOUTH

By Jason Sperb

For Melina

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

       This book is dedicated to understanding the lost ideals, disturbing truths, and hard facts underlying the histories of Disney's most notorious film. I wish to state upfront that I empathize with the more skeptical, even resistant, Disney fan. In many ways, I was a member of the company's key demographic. Raised by television, I was a child of the Reagan '80s, when the company most emphatically cemented its retrospective status as both a unique brand and a tradition of family entertainment. I am a white, middle-class American who grew up in the suburbs in the wake of "white flight" from major cities in the 1970s. I was also one of countless people who were themselves the product of a "Disney household." A key factor to the company's long-term business success is that parents are "encouraged" to raise their own children on all things Disney and to instill in their offspring the desire to raise their own kids in the same reassuring environment (i.e., buy recognizable stuff and get your kids to do likewise). Disney's phenomenal, largely self-generating, success in historical terms is really that simple—the plan to sell generational experiences, or more precisely, to sell the *always already nostalgic* experience of being a member of a particular kind of generation. This is not the only prospective audience for the company, but the one most conducive to the Disney brand today.

   Growing up, I was constantly brought along on a preprogrammed journey for my parents' own commodified nostalgia. In that environment, I was initiated into a longing for a time I never experienced firsthand (and, as a new father myself, I can now understand the appeal of that thoroughly selfish impulse). I remember hearing about how my parents' first date was to a Disney movie. I remember seeing *Snow White* and other rereleased "classic" films in theaters when I was young—in the era, before home video, when Disney still recycled their old films theatrically for every new generation of children. I remember the yearly pilgrimages

to Anaheim and Orlando. I remember paid subscriptions to the Disney Channel in its earliest cable iteration, back when it was mostly repurposed older footage with little original programming. I remember the "limited-time only" marketing of VHS tapes that created a mock-frenzy with consumers and secondhand dealers. I remember my parents' home littered with Disney memorabilia. I knew all the major films, characters, and songs. And I remember hearing in sometimes-embarrassed whispers about a film called *Song of the South*. But, as I would discover later, that film was more beloved, remembered, and *accessible* than I had first realized in the perpetual present of my ignorant youth.

As I've gotten older and somewhat wiser (in a very narrow sense), I remain sympathetic but also skeptical on the subject of Disney fandom. I'm decidedly less sympathetic when it comes to the company. My relationship to the larger Disney "universe" is perhaps ambivalent. Within those contradictions, it's been a thrilling but also daunting experience to write about the histories of a film for which I have no personal affection. There is a certain faction of fans who will never accept the possibility that either Disney or *Song of the South* is, or ever was, guilty of racist transgressions (to say nothing of class, gender, and other forms of ideological manipulation). There is not much to be said there. Instead, this is an informative, scholarly history written with one eye on the more reflexive and open-minded Disney fan, the one who seeks to go beyond nostalgia and consumption practices to know more about the company's too often neglected history. It is difficult to accept, or reflect on, a beloved object's complicated past without feeling as though one's own deep affections were being threatened. But there is no simple way to approach the subject.

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I did not think it would take so long to write another book. But perhaps that's just as well. I've learned to appreciate the opportunity more. And I've learned to better value the people who've stood with me the whole way. Any appreciation for this book must begin with my former adviser, Barbara Klinger. I was a very different scholar when I arrived at Indiana University in 2005; my interests were valid, but narrow. No one played a bigger role in opening my eyes to the larger world of film and media studies out there than did Barb, first as my teacher and then as my dissertation director. I cannot sufficiently express my gratitude, but I hope this book will validate her faith in me. Her imprint is on every page, and indeed, on everything I have ever written since I first walked into one of her classrooms. I can think of no better compliment than to say that Barb has been, and always will be, the biggest influence in my career.

That said, there is no shortage of individuals at Indiana University for whom I am thankful. This starts with my prospectus and dissertation committee members: Christopher Anderson, Purnima Bose, Karen Bowdre, and Joan Hawkins. I am likewise grateful for other former professors at Indiana whose courses challenged and inspired me: Jane Goodman, Yeidy Rivero, Jon Simons, Robert Terrill, and the late Matei Calinescu, whose recent passing devastated me. Of course, as with all graduate programs, I was lucky to be surrounded by an amazing group of colleagues and friends who motivated and supported me throughout: Mark Benedetti, Jon Cavallero, Amy Cornell, Seth Friedman, Mark Hain, Eric Harvey, Jennifer Lynn Jones, Amanda Keeler, Andrea Kelley, Michael Lahey, Dave McAvoy, Lori Hitchcock Morimoto, James Paasche, Justin Rawlins, Bob Rehak, Kathy Teige, Travis Vogan, and Sabrina Walker. Finally, I am especially grateful to Greg Waller. He was not only a great professor, chair, and friend, but he also gave me his old

Uncle Remus record. His thoughtfulness was one of the highlights of my time in Bloomington.

Through the years, I've given talks based on my *Song of the South* research here and there. I originally presented my work on Disney fans at the Affecting Representation/Representing Affect Conference at Ohio State University in January 2008. Later that spring, I presented it again at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference in Philadelphia. Two years later, I was back at the same annual conference—this time presenting my research on Ralph Bakshi's *Coonskin* in Los Angeles. In between, I had the good fortune to present work from chapter 3 at the Medium-to-Medium Conference at Northwestern University. I'd like to thank the various organizers for putting together uniformly excellent experiences.

During my research, I was assisted by Michael T. Martin of the Indiana Black Film Archives, Erika Jean Dowell at the Lilly Library, and the good folks at the Northwestern Microfilm Room. Originally, a version of chapter 6 first appeared in the summer 2010 issue of *Cinema Journal*. That research benefited from the feedback of the journal's two anonymous readers, and from the editorial guidance of Frank Episale and Heather Hendershot. On a broader note, I am blessed to be a part of a larger network of friends and colleagues who have been endlessly generous with their time and support throughout the researching and writing of this manuscript: Scott Balcerzak, Scott Bukatman, Robert Burgoyne, Corey Creekmur, Tim Davis, Sarah Delahousse, Steve Elworth, Marilyn Ferdinand, Michael Gillespie, Catherine Grant, Jonathan Gray, Hollis Griffin, Richard Grusin, Sara Hall, Lucas Hilderbrand, Derek Johnson, Selmin Kara, Amanda Ann Klein, Jason LaRiviere, Meredith Levine, Paula Massood, Tara McPherson, Jason Mittell, Roopali Mukherjee, Linda Haverty Rugg, Sean Stangland, J. P. Telotte, Rachel Thibault, Christopher Weedman, Susan White, Mark Williams, and Tony Williams. I would be nothing without them. To those I forgot, I sincerely apologize. It's been a long several years.

I feel, finally, that this book is symbolically indebted to Fredric Jameson. His work on postmodernism was perhaps the most influential reading I ever encountered in graduate school. And every time I return to it, I find even more to embrace. With age, however, I have found myself losing interest in my earlier theoretical ambitions, and instead have become much more interested in being a historian, as this book will show. As a result, a thinker like Jameson is perhaps not properly represented in a work such as this. At my dissertation defense in late 2009,

one of my committee members said that she kept thinking of Fredric Jameson while reading the manuscript. I was quietly flattered, but also pleased. His theories have influenced me deeply throughout the last decade. And, no doubt, his theories on the economic and historical implications of the postmodern haunt every page of this book.

As always, I am most grateful to my beautiful wife, Maggie, for her endless love and support, and our daughter, Melina. This is very much a project about generations, and about traditions and possibilities passed from one to another. I dedicate this project to her, with the hope that she will create a better future than the one left to her.

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DISNEY'S MOST NOTORIOUS FILM

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INTRODUCTION

They have kept Song of the South *in a vault within a vault. I think there are three locks on it.*
ROBERT SMIGEL

It is not true that we don't see what is not on the screen. On the contrary, when the absence is repeated constantly, then we see that *it is not there. Absence becomes reality.*
JAMES SNEAD, *WHITE SCREENS, BLACK IMAGES*

Hollywood history is littered with racist artifacts. Yet not all have vanished for good, and their occasional endurance can tell us just as much about industry practices and racial relations in the present as in the since-forgotten time in which they were first made. Disney's *Song of the South* (1946) is today one such film, another racist cinematic relic from a past filled with no shortage of anachronistic and offensive depictions. *Song of the South* depicts plantation life in the late nineteenth century—a time marked by unimaginable cruelty—as a white musical utopia. The name itself may not ring a bell at first. Yet mention Brer Rabbit, the "Tar Baby," Uncle Remus (James Baskett), or "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," and suddenly many people remember that they once were quite familiar with the film. If they do not quite remember seeing the full-length theatrical version itself, many might remember reading the Golden Book version, listening to the read-along record, watching an excerpt on Super 8mm, or humming along to the opening credits of the *Wonderful World of Disney* television show.

Based loosely on the nineteenth-century literary stories of Joel Chandler Harris, *Song of the South* mixed live-action footage of Uncle Remus,

Uncle Remus (James Baskett).

the kindly ex-slave, and his seemingly idyllic life on a Southern plantation, with animated sequences of Brer Rabbit outsmarting Brer Fox and Brer Bear. Despite being a landmark achievement in cost-cutting hybrid animation, early audiences rejected both its racial insensitivities, in the wake of World War II, and its low-budget aesthetic, on the heels of more polished full-length animation productions like *Snow White* (1937) and *Dumbo* (1941). Yet *Song of the South* hardly disappeared after modest releases in the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, as recently as the 1970s and 1980s, this offensive film was quite popular. In the wake of the "white backlash" against the civil rights movement, the subsequent rise of Reaganist conservatism in the United States, and Disney's emergent status after the 1960s as a powerful "family institution," *Song of the South* was a fixture of the American media landscape, forty years after it premiered in theaters.

The first question one asks now is, Whatever happened to *Song of the South*? It's tempting to speculate on the circumstances of its assumed demise. Even the ideologically conservative Disney Corporation—never one to pass up a chance at exploiting older properties in its vault—has refused to rerelease it to American audiences for nearly three decades. As such, it is equally tempting to toss *Song of the South* back into the dustbin of Hollywood history, and with it the disturbing histories its continued presence would evoke. The uglier truth, though, is that this especially problematic movie has not gone anywhere. Thanks to decades of

occasional theatrical success, cult followings, and Disney's own careful and extensive corporate remediation, the complicated histories of race and media convergence that *Song of the South* embodies are as present and relevant as ever. There is no shortage of infamously racist films from the so-called golden days of Hollywood—from well-known titles such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) or *The Littlest Rebel* (1935), to largely forgotten ones like *Check and Double Check* (1930) or *Stand Up and Cheer!* (1934). Yet *Song of the South*'s troublingly elusive, and resilient, survival may be the most distinctive. It articulates fascinating truths about the history of American media practices, its audiences, and the at-times mutually reinforcing negotiation of racist images between them. Beyond the limits of morbid curiosity, hidden here is a more fascinating history of the relationship between industries, consumers, and racial identities.

Song of the South has been a quietly, but revealingly, persistent film for seven decades. Its existence nearly spans the entire lifetime of the more famous company that spawned, exploited, and eventually tossed it (officially) aside. Understanding the film's role within a larger history of convergence culture and racial formations requires (1) documenting the ways that Disney recirculated, repurposed, and rewrote the film, (2) appreciating the diverse racial and political climates in which it appeared (or didn't), and (3) articulating how different audiences responded to the

Song of the South *ends on an image of utopia, as young and old, black and white, animated and real, all walk off together into the sunset. Yet its long history is hardly so simple or positive.*

film and its fragments via their own discursive production. This book employs a historical–materialist methodology that triangulates the cult history of *Song of the South* within all three contexts in order to move closer to answering several interrelated questions: How have the textual and extratextual dynamics of "media convergence" historically intersected with larger cultural negotiations regarding racial identity in the twentieth century? How have industry strategies of remediation and forms of participatory culture affected socially constructed notions of whiteness as mediated through, and in the reception of, representations of African Americans in classical Hollywood films? How does the subsequent repurposing of these films in ancillary venues complicate its (and its audiences') relationship to the "original" text? How do issues such as the larger political climates in the United States; personal, public, and commercial forms of nostalgia; and affective formations further problematize these questions? More specifically, in what ways do both a powerful media institution (Disney) and its considerable, and shifting, set of audiences play a sometimes-mutual role in embracing, ignoring, and exploiting the continued presence of its racist past?

Embodying a range of contexts central to understanding these questions, *Song of the South* offers a fascinatingly unfortunate cult status as a notoriously racist film at the (hidden) heart of a particularly image-conscious entertainment media empire. Disney's film has appeared prominently in moments of technological change and media platform transitions, and in periods of cultural upheaval and racial tension. As some older Hollywood films migrated—all or in part—across newer media and ancillary market channels, Disney repeatedly returned to *Song of the South* as a source for revenue and repurposed material despite its troubled origins and problematic history. Alternately, the film's theatrical appearances and reception over the last several decades often closely reflected white America's racial consciousness, and lack thereof. Not surprisingly, then, fragments of the old Brer Rabbit film still exist in a variety of forms to this day. The future-oriented, vaguely utopian logic of both convergence culture and post-racial whiteness imply, or insist, that audiences forget the larger history of media practices underlining both. Yet *Disney's Most Notorious Film* instead seeks to illuminate the powerful ways that the history of media convergence has alternatingly intensified, shifted, and dissipated representations of racism and constructions of whiteness.

My analysis also suggests the possibility that any thorough understanding of the political implications of a given film or television show

requires sustained attention to its many ancillary reiterations and adaptations. "Given their extended presence," writes Jonathan Gray in *Show Sold Separately*, "any filmic or televisual text and its cultural impact, value, and meaning cannot be adequately analyzed without taking into account the film or televisual program's many proliferations" into supplementary media texts.[1] This attention to the "paratexts"[2]—the additional texts and contexts surrounding a primary text—becomes especially acute when focused on a Disney film that has benefited from its parent company's noted success in exploiting its theatrical properties across numerous forms of cross-media promotion and synergy. *Song of the South* is another beneficiary of what Christopher Anderson has dubbed Disney's "centrifugal force . . . one that encouraged the consumption of further Disney texts, further Disney products, further Disney experiences."[3] In the seventy years since its debut, *Song of the South* footage, stories, music, and characters have reappeared in comic strips, spoken records, children's books, television shows, toys, board games, musical albums, theme park attractions, VHS and DVD compilations, and even video games (including Xbox 360's recent *Kinect Disneyland Adventures*, 2011). By conditioning the reception of the main text, these paratexts are fundamentally intertwined with it, thus problematizing the hierarchical distinction between the two. What I hope to add to this discussion is the powerful and often unconsidered role that paratexts have played *historically* and *generationally* in shifting perceptions of the full-length theatrical version. Thus, looking primarily at the many histories of a single text, such as *Song of the South*, is not merely adequate to the complex task of articulating how media industries and consumers negotiated both racist imagery and its attendant cultural histories—given the historical unimaginability of any particular film's textual ubiquity, let alone its many possible interpretations and meanings, such a focused, sustained approach might even be necessary.

SONG OF THE SOUTH

Disney originally released *Song of the South* in 1946, and then reissued it in 1956, 1972, 1980, and 1986. *Song of the South* is the story of a white woman, Sally (Ruth Warrick), and her son, Johnny (Bobby Driscoll), who go to live with her mother on a Georgia plantation. There Johnny befriends Uncle Remus, who lives in a cabin behind the mansion and teaches the children parables about life. For instance,

Johnny (Bobby Driscoll), the young protagonist of Song of the South.

when Johnny wants to run away to reunite with his father, Uncle Remus intervenes to let him know, "You can't run away from trouble. Ain't no place that far." The parables are visualized through striking animated sequences, featuring such characters as Brer Fox, Brer Bear, and Brer Rabbit (two of which were also voiced by Baskett). Merging animation and live action was cutting edge for its time, though the decision—as with many such choices in the early decades of Disney—was made largely to save money. Owing to the logistical and financial limitations caused by World War II, theatrical revenue was scarce and studio output tied up with government propaganda and training films. Under these conditions, a partially animated feature-length film was much cheaper to produce than a fully animated one.

Despite the film's groundbreaking technological innovation and Oscar-winning song, "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" (for which it is still most remembered today), many post–World War II audiences in 1946 found *Song of the South* not only aesthetically underwhelming but also troubling in its regressive depiction of race relations in the American South. Over time, the film's reputation was complicated by having emerged from a studio that long privileged an overtly white view of the world. As Patricia Turner noted in 1994, *Song of the South* was the first and only Disney feature "in which an African-American actor played a prominent role,"[4] and as a happy-go-lucky former slave no less. In fact, until 2009's

animated *The Princess and the Frog*, it was shockingly the only Disney theatrical film to feature a lead black character at all. Although initial reactions to *Song of the South* in 1946 were not unanimous for either white or black audiences,[5] the influential National Association for the Advancement of Colored People denounced the film as an idyllic presentation of racial relations in the post-Reconstruction South.[6] At best, the film stretches credibility in its depiction of contented servants in a position of obedience to Southern whites. For years, this aspect of the film renewed controversy with its subsequent (and sometimes just rumored) rereleases.

In 1946, *Song of the South* was an unsurprising critical and commercial disappointment. As Neal Gabler documented in his recent biography of Disney, the studio was underwhelmed by the initial performance of *Song of the South*, which it had hoped would be its big postwar smash.[7] Evidence from the time, as published in *Variety*, confirms his archival research. *Song of the South* earned $3.4 million in the United States and Canada in late 1946 and 1947, enough to rank only as high as twenty-third among all films for the same period.[8] In *Making Movies Black*, Thomas Cripps noted that several African American activists around this time actually abandoned their intended boycott of the film, in no small part because *Song of the South* did not prove the high-profile project they had anticipated.[9] As part of the postwar challenge to Hollywood to offer more positive representations of African Americans, cultural critics and activists had planned to make an example of the film because of Disney's well-known brand name and the visibility that came with it, but they lost momentum when *Song of the South* underperformed. The film's disappointing box office explains in part why it was not released for another ten years (in 1956), and then not for another sixteen years after that (in 1972). While the film was not pulled permanently until the late 1980s, rumors of its possible disappearance first circulated at least twenty years earlier.

As its popularity increased over time, *Song of the South* was considered a consistent moneymaker only much later in its theatrical life cycle. Its first big financial splash was during its *third* release, in the early 1970s—only a couple years, ironically, after it was rumored that the film would be shelved permanently because of its controversial status. Several months after *Song of the South*'s rerelease in 1972, the *Los Angeles Times* boldly proclaimed that the film was expected to earn over $7 million that same year, and become at that point the highest-grossing reissue in Disney history.[10] Peggy Russo went so far as to assert that the film

"grossed twice as much [during that year] as it had in its two previous releases." [11] More modestly, *Variety* reported in early 1973 that *Song of the South* had earned nearly $6 million during that one reissue alone. [12] But even the slightly revised number was considerable. In 1972, *Song of the South* was the highest-grossing reissue from any company that year, ranking it sixteenth among all films. It more than *doubled* what *Variety* had reported just a year earlier as the film's *total* gross in the previous twenty-six years ($5.4 million). [13] Disney released the film again eight years later, in late 1980. Between January 1981 [14] and January 1982, [15] the film grossed another $8.6 million in the U.S.–Canadian market. By the time *Song of the South* completed its final theatrical appearance in 1986 and into 1987, the film had earned nearly another $8 million. [16] The old Uncle Remus film remained on *Variety*'s list for the "All-Time Film Rental Champs" well into the 1990s—a list on which it did not even first *appear* until three decades after its original theatrical debut. The trade paper, surprised by the film's late resurgence, speculated in 1973 that *Song of the South* was "probably helped by a bit of racial stereotype dispute early in its run." [17] Although it is very difficult to prove a direct causal relationship, *Song of the South* made more money *after* acquiring a sustained notoriety for racist images that caused it to disappear from circulation for nearly two decades.

But how? Why? Regardless of how one reads a controversial film such as *Song of the South*, such interpretation speaks to the limits of textual analysis. In addition to Russo and Turner, there have been other illuminating readings of *Song of the South*'s racist imagery—particularly those by James Snead and Donald Bogle. [18] They offer a partial picture of the ways the film's representations have worked since 1946. At least as far back as Helen Taylor's book on *Gone with the Wind* fans, [19] there has been a movement to shift away from universalized critics' readings of racially controversial representations and toward a richer picture of how audiences have interpreted such content. [20] In general, there has been more written about the political and cultural representations [21] in Disney texts than about the diverse range of audiences who have negotiated them. [22] Any attempt at articulating a film's ideologies over such an immense amount of time is better shaped by two larger questions: Why did the producers and distributors (i.e., Disney) do *what* they did *when* they did? And how and why did certain audiences at the time respond as they did? As my book will show, this approach offers a fuller historical account of the relationship between race and media convergence. Whether one reads the film as "positive" or "negative," or "accurate" or "inaccurate,"

is idiosyncratically rooted in a complex web of cultural, economic, and educational factors. But this is not to suggest false equivalence. Criticism of *Song of the South* over the years has outweighed support for the film. Rather, truly understanding what a film's problematic representations do, and why, requires sustained attention to those contexts that invariably shape audiences' ephemeral reactions. This approach focuses on reception contexts, then, but also on the constantly shifting technological platforms and industrial practices that affect how people can (and cannot) see, hear, and manipulate the film for themselves.

Several interlocking factors affect interpretation at any given moment. The wide range of meanings that have been attached to *Song of the South* through the years are often products of an idiosyncratic mix of issues. The simplest, if still complicated, approach is textual—looking at the film's characters, themes, and plot. The critical task of analyzing Johnny, Uncle Remus, the plantation, and so forth may seem like straightforward narrative analysis. Yet even such images are steeped in complicated historical and industrial contexts, such as African American stereotypes, representations of the child, and the cultural logic of the Hollywood musical, to name only a few. Other important questions include: How do economic, educational, and racial backgrounds influence one's preexisting attitudes? What were the larger racial climates in the United States when viewers saw the film? In what venue, and in what format, did they see it (or parts of it)? How did Disney's socially constructed position as an American cultural institution, as a standard-bearer for notions of "family entertainment," influence reactions? What familiarity, if any, did audiences have with the text (hearing the songs, reading the books, talking with family) before seeing the film? How often, over a particular period, did they see it? How much time passed from the moment they last saw it to the time they wrote about their reaction to it? How does nostalgia for Disney, for the film, for ancillary memories the film may incidentally evoke, affect interpretation? How do the intensely affective components of *Song of the South*—its bright colors, skillful animation, and lively music—intersect with more cognitive questions about the film's representations? These questions highlight the difficulty in offering just one reading of the film. There is no one issue that overrides the others, and they all come into play at some point or another.

Of course, Disney often succeeded through this kind of ideological ambiguity. Like most Hollywood films, *Song of the South*'s "ideology" can be tricky to pin down, since its depiction of plantation life works through obscurities (such as which exact year it is set in). As a result,

by 1940s standards the film is careful to avoid overtly offending either liberals or conservatives, even while its choice of the magnolia myth setting—that of white plantation houses, chivalrous men, virtuous women, and second-class African American workers—submerses the film in a reactionary nostalgia. Disney often appealed to contradictory ideologies, making films that not only reflected their times, but also allowed diverse audiences to read their own favorable elements into the text. This is another way that basic textual readings ultimately offer little definitive evidence. In the 1930s, Disney had an unexpectedly huge hit in *Three Little Pigs*, which a range of audiences then read as symbolic of everything from the Great Depression in the United States to the rise of Fascism in Europe. In the 1950s, meanwhile, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* offered a nostalgic allegory about the United States' rising fear of nuclear technology; the film ultimately suggested that such power depended upon who had access to the technology and what their purpose was. A decade later, Disney's rare live-action smash *The Love Bug* commented on the emergent countercultural movement in a way that offered potential laughs for both flummoxed conservatives and flattered hippies, resulting in the highest-grossing film of 1969.[23] Even 1989's *Little Mermaid*, the film that saved Disney feature-length animation, contained contradictory elements regarding U.S. attitudes toward post-feminism in the 1980s. This is not to defend any one film, but to emphasize the careful contradictions through which major entertainment companies work when investing heavily in high-profile projects that depend on acceptance with the widest possible audience. In each case, Disney consciously made the decision to avoid editorializing on what the "true" interpretation should be, so as to prevent any single segment of the paying public from feeling offended or marginalized. In short, it is impossible to reduce any problematic film to one reading, even when there is no shortage of contexts explaining why *Song of the South* is racist.

THE PLANTATION MYTH

At its narrative core, *Song of the South*'s representation of African Americans is quite problematic, perpetuating cinematic and literary stereotypes rooted in images of the magnolia myth. This cliché was common in Hollywood films early on, especially prior to World War II. These pictures often presented the nineteenth-century Southern plantation as an idyllic, racially harmonious utopia, and were mostly am-

Hattie McDaniel, playing the same "mammy" stereotype she made famous a decade earlier in Gone with the Wind.

biguous about whether they were set before the Civil War. Initially, the idea for *Song of the South* was motivated by Disney's attempt to build off the phenomenal success seven years earlier of David O. Selznick's *Gone with the Wind*, easily the highest-grossing film of the period. Disney originally obtained the rights to the Harris books in 1939, hoping to exploit *Gone with the Wind*'s popularity before the war, but financial issues and propaganda obligations during World War II pushed back the film's production. Beyond the animated sequences, much of the film's Southern imagery is a watered-down version of Selznick's lavish spectacle. *Song of the South*, Taylor argues, recycled "*GWTW*'s worst clichés."[24] Within this nostalgic distortion of history, African Americans are depicted as subservient to, and dependent on, their white masters.

Song of the South, for example, features not one, but three noted racist cinematic stereotypes that were often prevalent in this genre. In addition to Uncle Remus as the always smiling, magical "Uncle Tom" who exists only to serve the needs of white people, Hattie McDaniel repeated the same "mammy" stereotype she had played to great acclaim in *Gone with the Wind*. Bogle has even argued that Uncle Remus really evokes the "coon" stereotype (for which "Stepin Fetchit" is most well-known), since his role is more comic than tragic.[25] Finally, in *Song of the South* there is also the character of "Toby" (Glenn Leedy), the embodiment of the "pickaninny," a term that Walt himself used to describe the charac-

Glenn Leedy as young Toby.

ter.[26] A younger variation on the "coon," this character was often an im-possibly dim-witted black child whose main narrative function never ex-tended beyond being the constant butt of visual gags for the amusement of white audiences. The fact that these three characters maintain largely "positive" relationships with Johnny and the other white characters does not offset the deeper problems within the film's racial hierarchies. All three ultimately reinforce the vision of an illusory utopia where African Americans are perpetually helpful, passive, and nonthreatening to the privileged whites, who are the only ones to benefit from this way of life.

One typical defense against the film's plantation context is that Amer-ican history cannot be changed. Yet evoking the legacy of slavery in the South as an unfortunate reality is disingenuous in this context. For one, it is inherently silly to hide behind notions of historical realism regarding a film that depends heavily on lively musical numbers, colorful hybrid animation, and talking animals. Setting that aside, *Song of the South* is further undermined by the willful inattention to the physical and emo-tional violence used to maintain this way of life, before and after the war. Instead, audiences are treated to images of content African Ameri-cans who, of their own choosing, seem perfectly happy with their lower lot in life. In this regard, the use of the musical form is particularly de-grading. This pop-culture stereotype of the pre–Civil War South often migrated into generally hazy depictions of postwar life, and reinforced a hierarchy of racial superiority that white audiences decades later could

find simplistically reassuring during the complicated racial upheavals of the twentieth century. Moreover, these films are notable for the fact that they were really the only representations of African Americans in Hollywood during this time. African Americans may have largely worked on plantations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but as a diverse group they had achieved many other accomplishments since then. Thus the continual perpetuation of plantation movies and racist stereotypes ultimately said more about the cultural and economic dispositions of the predominantly white moviegoers than about the harsh truths of U.S. history.

At the same time, it would be inaccurate for at least two reasons to say that the historical context in which the film was produced somehow makes it more acceptable. For one, as I develop below, *Song of the South*'s stereotypes were already outdated by the time Disney made the film. As scholars such as Taylor have noted before, the 1930s may have seen a huge surge in the popularity of "the 'Southern films' . . . [which] presented to Depression audiences nostalgic and idealized images of a feudal 'paradise lost' of large plantations, white-columned mansions, beautiful Southern belles and their chivalrous beaux, against a backdrop of loyal and humorous slaves."[27] These most prominently included musicals such as Bing Crosby's *Mississippi* (1935) and the 1936 version of *Show Boat*, as well as dramas such as *Gone with the Wind*. But those representations that may have been more prevalent before World War II were decidedly different from those that were accepted just a decade later. Also, a deeper issue transcends the film's initial release and follows it to this day. Namely, *Song of the South* does not become any *less* offensive now just because it was produced several decades earlier. Audiences' varying interest in a film reflects the period in which they are viewing it more than the (often forgotten) period in which it was created. This is especially true when a film such as *Song of the South* becomes more popular *later*. Temporal distance does not make the present affection for, or empathy with, racist relationships from the past any more acceptable today.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE WHITE BACKLASH

Even more than identifying racist Hollywood stereotypes, a brief history of the civil rights movement is crucial to understanding both audiences' and Disney's respective relationships to *Song*

of the South over the course of the twentieth century. The theatrical reappearances of Disney's film coincided with, and reflected, several key moments in white America's negotiation with the emergence of increased rights and visibility for African Americans in mainstream media culture. Invariably, *Song of the South* was positioned, by Disney as well as by critical and supportive audiences, as a reaction against particular moments of cultural upheaval. For decades, the reappearances of the company's most infamous film corresponded with significant shifts in white America's attitudes toward African Americans' collective struggle for equal rights and opportunities. What was occurring in the United States during the 1940s, the 1960s, the 1980s, and so forth greatly shaped how people received and interpreted the film. Just as important, these periods within the civil rights movement also deeply affected if and when Disney chose to rerelease the film, and in what format, to general U.S. audiences. There are in particular three distinct periods characterizing white attitudes toward the progress of the civil rights movement: liberal activism during and after World War II, the "white backlash" in the 1960s and 1970s, and the era of "post-racial" Reaganism that began to settle in during the 1980s and that largely continues to this day. Collectively, they offer a clearer picture of the socially constructed discourse of "whiteness" that has historically shaped the recirculation, reception, and perseverance of a racist artifact like *Song of the South*.

During World War II, the United States and its allies were engaged in a long and costly global conflict with Germany, Italy, and Japan. The country found itself in a moment that required the deep commitment of every man and woman to supporting the cause, regardless of color. Whether it was fighting in segregated units in Europe, working the factories in the North, or plowing their fields in the South, African Americans were needed every bit as much as the next person. At the same time, the ugly white supremacist rhetoric emerging in particular from Nazi Germany evoked for many Americans an uncomfortable similarity to the cultural logic underlying decades of Jim Crow laws in the South and institutional racism in the North. As such, the U.S. federal government, through the Office of War Information (OWI), actively worked with the NAACP and Hollywood studios to create more positive, less stereotypical images of African Americans in feature-length fiction narratives and nonfiction government films. Meanwhile, these images were largely well-received by wartime and postwar audiences of every race, who were anxious to both support the common national cause of the

war effort and to see themselves as more racially enlightened than the enemies they were fighting overseas.

Within this environment, Disney decided to make a film that reduced black characters to the same prewar stereotypes that the OWI, NAACP, and most other Hollywood studios had consciously made a decision to avoid. Disney may have hoped that plantation films would still find a receptive audience a mere seven years after *Gone with the Wind*'s record-breaking success. Yet making the film when they ultimately did revealed a shockingly tin ear regarding the activism and racial climate of the time. Many people were thus deeply critical of the racist assumptions in *Song of the South*, much more than they might have been a decade earlier. This was not a response limited just to African American activists and white liberals. In the pages of mainstream publications like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, critics and audiences expressed their disappointment and even anger at seeing old stereotypes return in such a prominent Hollywood film so soon after the war had ended. Although *Song of the South* was not a box office flop, it was a major disappointment for the studio, in considerable part because of the progressive backlash to its racist images. In short, *Song of the South* was not typical of other Hollywood films of the time in terms of its depiction of idyllic life on a peaceful Southern plantation. If anything, one could argue that Disney's film was the first of many nostalgic films after World War II that went out of its way to *revive* this otherwise dormant, even shunned, subgenre of the Hollywood melodrama.

Of course, despite the best efforts of political activists at the time, this was not the end of the story for *Song of the South*, unlike many now-forgotten films. Disney's film would reappear and take on new meanings for audiences as circumstances changed. But this original historical context for *Song of the South*'s debut in 1946 should not be forgotten or marginalized. *Song of the South* was *always* considered a racist film. Yet this truth is easily distorted by personal nostalgia and by a muddled, generalizing understanding of Hollywood history, which mistakenly assumes that every film or television show made before the 1960s was either racist, sexist, or both. In turn, this assumption lends itself to hollow historical statements based on a false equivalence—since most films were racist "back then," the argument goes, *Song of the South* should not be so harshly criticized now. But aside from simplifying the history of Hollywood to the point of blatant inaccuracy, this assertion also misses the more local history of *Song of the South*'s initial reception.

Despite this racial climate, Disney was not anxious to give up on high-profile theatrical product like *Song of the South*, particularly when so much of their business model is focused on reusing older properties. As early as the 1940s and 1950s, the company's existing feature-length films provided seemingly endless revenue opportunities in the form of theatrical reissues and ancillary consumer markets. Yet even Disney was not oblivious to the larger cultural attitudes at the time, and the company approached *Song of the South* carefully. The company rereleased the film in 1956; while the film elicited fewer criticisms, it also made relatively little money. After that, the film did not appear again until 1972. Disney's official line then was that the film just "skipped a reissue cycle,"[28] since it would have been due to reappear around 1963 or 1964. Yet the film's absence during the 1960s tells us as much about Disney and the United States' complicated relationship to the civil rights movement as its reappearance a decade later ultimately would. When *Song of the South* finally returned, sixteen years after its last appearance, the racial attitudes of white America had changed as well.

The year 1964 was arguably the apex of the Civil Rights movement, and public polls repeatedly indicated that white support for the cause of African American equality was at an all-time high in the United States.[29] The activism that had begun with World War II, and persevered through the spectacle of racial discrimination and violence in the 1950s, was finally paying off. That year marked a landslide electoral victory in Congress for the Democrats and the reelection of President Lyndon B. Johnson. This achievement would lead to the passage of various pieces of "Great Society" legislation in Congress. In addition to providing health care and aiding community action programs designed to educate and empower the inner-city poor, the Great Society included laws that were intended to put an end to racial discrimination at the voting booths, within housing policies, and in employment practices. The Great Society was arguably the single biggest legislative achievement in the history of the civil rights struggle for African American causes, and it benefited from widespread support among many white voters. It should not be surprising, then, that Disney decided to "skip" releasing *Song of the South* in the mid-1960s.

But 1964 was also important in the history of white America's racial consciousness for other, less honorable reasons. In retrospect, it was the beginning of the end for largely sympathetic attitudes among whites toward the civil rights movement, leading to what sociologist Doug McAdam has called the "white backlash," which was in full effect by the

end of the decade.[30] Most prominently, Southern and other conserva-
tive Democrats abandoned the party, believing that the Great Society
betrayed their core beliefs about the lower social and economic status
of African Americans, who should be left to take care of themselves. Re-
publicans successfully played on a building sense of white lower- and
middle-class resentment. They argued that the government treated
blacks better than it treated whites—an astoundingly ignorant, but fright-
eningly effective, claim that conservatives continue to make to this day.
Urban rebellions in the cities and increasing white flight to the suburbs
widened the divide further. Even moderate and liberal Democrats who
remained deeply sympathetic to the civil rights movement in the mid-to-
late 1960s found their collective attention and energies quickly distracted
by the more urgent, costly fiasco that was the Vietnam War. Thus, al-
most as soon as the Great Society was coming into effect, conservative
politicians were already mobilizing a combination of active resentment
and inattentive indifference among whites to seize power throughout
the country. The Republican Ronald Reagan was elected governor of
traditionally liberal California in 1966; two years later, Richard Nixon
was elected president. By the 1980s, socially conservative Democrats
were supporting Reagan for president in droves—the culmination of a
decades-long, white conservative attempt to stop, and undo, the progress
of the civil rights movement.

   Not coincidently, *Song of the South* quietly began its resurgence dur-
ing this period. Three equally important factors influenced the film's
resurrection from the dead during the 1960s. While Disney's strategies of
convergence and ambivalence among African American audiences were
both key, the shifting attitudes among white Americans in the wake of
the Great Society cannot be overstated. By the end of the 1960s, as sup-
port for the civil rights movement dissipated, Disney began floating the
idea of rereleasing its most notorious film, which they claimed was now
the "most requested" title in the vault.[31] By 1972 *Song of the South* was
back in theaters and suddenly doing record business. As a nostalgic look
back to a pre–civil rights utopia, *Song of the South* offered these audi-
ences a reassuring image of harmless and content African Americans—
back at the plantation, hard at work for their white masters, and com-
pletely uninterested in equality, let alone freedom. It is inaccurate to pin
the film's newfound popularity *only* on a white, anti–civil rights desire to
return to the illusory era of white privilege that the film depicts. Yet this
was undoubtedly one of the central reasons for its success, and it created
an environment in which Disney could finally rerelease the film without

provoking much controversy. By 1980, the film was back yet again, and continued to do strong box office throughout the conservative climate of the Reagan '80s. *Song of the South*'s appeal was so prominent during this decade that critics and activists began to finally take note of the film again, explicitly tying its nostalgic, reactionary popularity to the larger political atmosphere created by the sitting U.S. president.

POST-RACIAL WHITENESS

Reaganism brought into relief a particularly potent form of whiteness that invariably shapes most defenses of *Song of the South*. "Whiteness" does not mean the same as "white people." Rather, it evokes a hegemonic cultural logic that consciously and unconsciously reinforces white attitudes, beliefs, and positions as the dominant, unquestioned way of life. Regardless of his or her race, every American at some point or another negotiates the norms of whiteness—equally capable of either uncritically reproducing or self-reflexively questioning them. Neither attitude challenges this framework as the dominant way of seeing the world. After World War II, many people critical of *Song of the South* acknowledged their own subject position in relation to the dominant discourse of whiteness that had produced the film in the first place. Yet others, especially those sympathetic to Disney, became increasingly resistant over time to acknowledging racial categories. Instead, they embraced a post-racial attitude that claimed to do no less than deny racial difference altogether. This has been especially prevalent since the end of white support for the civil rights movement, but it can be seen in some of the earliest defenses of the film as well. Post-racial politics are really the most insidious and resilient type of whiteness, emerging largely unseen in the 1960s and continuing its destructive impulses to this very day.

On a superficial level, post-racial attitudes seem positive enough, since they mimic long-held liberal ideals of racial equality and tolerance. Indeed, it is a definite improvement from the days when lynching, rioting, and racial epithets were thought to be "acceptable" ways for many whites to interact with, and control, African Americans. But the reality is that post-racial mind-sets have done nothing to make people equal. Rather, they have been used to support conservative policies that inhibit progress toward social justice. By denying racial difference, one can deny the very possibility of racial discrimination, and thus undo the accomplishments of the civil rights movement. No U.S. politician mastered this

better than did Reagan, who always appeared optimistic and carefully color-blind in his use of language, which appealed on the surface to the best of people's ideals. Yet within his post-racial speeches, he also managed to include coded terms like "welfare queens," which demonized minorities as lazy and undeserving, and stoked the anger of white voters who resented African American progress. Because the color of one's skin shouldn't matter, Reagan and his followers argued, there is no reason to help blacks or any other minority group, even though they continue to suffer the brunt of institutional, legal, and economic inequality.

This cuts to the core of the problem in any cultural defense of *Song of the South* that insists on seeing the movie as a color-blind celebration of a (rich) white boy's seemingly positive friendship with a (poor) black man. Aside from being a patronizing white fantasy of racial relationships in the United States, this reading also avoids—and even reinforces through its evasion of the subject—a deep ignorance about the larger cultural, economic, and racial hierarchies being unquestionably perpetuated by a film with no grounding in historical fact. These post-racial attitudes support the hegemonic position of whiteness precisely by denying that racial differences exist. Just because Johnny doesn't see Uncle Remus as a black person doesn't mean that the latter ceases to live on a plantation, or ceases to be subservient to whites and their needs, or ceases to have no identity or opportunity outside white culture. At best, it represents what I have elsewhere called "evasive whiteness."[32] What are perhaps well-intended attempts at avoiding the often-incendiary topic of race nonetheless produce the side effect of maintaining the existing state of racial affairs. If society does not have to recognize the rights of minorities, then it also does not have to acknowledge the presence (and power) of the white majority.

STRATEGIC REMEDIATION AND TRANSMEDIA DISSIPATION

Such complicated racial climates play a key role in informing how a controversial text is historically received. The resiliency of such racist imagery is also dependent on the complex relationship between industry producers, paratexts, and media audiences. Hollywood's racist past haunts the cultural politics of modern convergence media. "Convergence," Henry Jenkins defined in *Convergence Culture*, refers broadly to "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the co-

operation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want."[33] As a conceptual model, convergence emphasizes two historically interlocking influences regarding the analysis of media—the industry that produced the text(s) and the audiences who consume, interpret, resist, or casually notice them. Studies in convergence today see both sites of meaning production as increasingly intertwined and even interdependent. Thus studies in convergence have focused largely on contemporary issues, since technological developments in new media have both expanded, and streamlined, the ways that consumers and media institutions can directly interact. "Everything about the structure of the modern entertainment industry," Jenkins writes, "was designed with this single idea in mind—the construction and enhancement of entertainment franchises" across multiple media platforms and ancillary markets.[34]

I see the various meanings attached to *Song of the South* and its paratexts through the years as grounded in a longer history of convergence. My research works through two interrelated concepts: *strategic remediation* and *transmedia dissipation*. As I will show, both offer theoretical frameworks for convergence that are more ambivalent. The former, strategic remediation, focuses on how companies often have had an active investment in *what* becomes remediated. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin defined "remediation" as a process whereby newer media re-represent and re-produce older media, and vice versa. Grusin and Bolter discuss how emergent media such as the Internet, digital photography, and video games fit within a history of media studies that goes back to television's recycling of film, film's adapting of literature, and so forth. In the age of convergence, newer media today are neither ahistorical nor unique to our current historical moment. Moreover, different media remain in tension with one another, regardless of which form they assume. "The new medium can remediate by trying to absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized," write Grusin and Bolter. "The very act of remediation, however, ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced; the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged ways."[35] Content migrates from platform to platform as various media appropriate and rearrange preexisting forms, while older media can in turn remediate newer ones (such as a short story about going to the movies, or a film about the Internet, and so forth). What results is a detailed web of remediation that stretches across the history of modern media

formations and practices. And there remains the need for a closer look at the cultural implications of this otherwise-standard industrial and aesthetic practice.

Remediation is never a politically or culturally neutral act, any more than it is a purely aesthetic one. Any number of reasons influence why a major corporation repurposes older intellectual property the way that it does (or doesn't). For instance, Disney found numerous profitable avenues for recycling *Song of the South* in ways that rarely ever recirculated the film uncritically, whether as a television episode, children's book, or theme park ride. Instead, they strategically remediate only the least offensive parts of *Song of the South* for further profit, such as the recent pop star Miley Cyrus (aka "Hannah Montana") doing a seemingly innocuous cover of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah." The company, both embracing and resisting its valuable but problematic property, carefully reused selective parts of the film in other media platforms. The result is transmedia dissipation, where intellectual property diffuses across the dispersed texts of media convergence culture. Over the course of several decades, Disney's corporate strategy scattered *Song of the South* in fragments as much as it expanded the film's narrative universe.

The persistence of such images across platform transitions is a point often less examined by new media scholars and critical race theorists. The former's focus on being technologically timely can create the effect of ahistoricism. Meanwhile, the latter offer detailed critiques of problematic texts and moments of reception, but they can miss a film's resiliency through both remediation and recirculation. Since nostalgia is such a dominant feature in remediation, racist images from the past will often follow. Svetlana Boym noted that nostalgia "inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals."[36] The comfort of appealing to the past, she argues, naturalizes the volatility of technological change in modern society. At the heart of shifts in newer media platforms, ironically, are often nostalgic appeals back to older existing properties, even racist ones, for a sense of aesthetic reassurance and creative stability within the new medium's unfamiliarity. For example, *Amos 'n' Andy* was a popular 1920s radio show featuring two laughably incompetent black characters (voiced by white men), who provided comic relief to large, white and black audiences. It reinforced the "coon" stereotype of African Americans as lazy and impossibly stupid. Yet, despite its notorious status, the program endured for decades through different media. The radio program's popularity was so widespread that it culminated in a 1930 feature-length film, *Check and*

Double Check, which featured the white performers appearing in black-face. The program ran well into the 1950s, during which time it also spun off into a short-lived television show. While activist protests forced this new televisual version off the air after only a few seasons, episodes continued to run in syndication well into the 1960s. *Amos 'n' Andy* was the rule, not the exception, for representations of African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century. Its resilience throughout the years and across several different media platforms testified to the racist ideologies within the audiences who supported it. But just as important, this survival spoke to the reassuring durability of old stereotypes during the upheaval of new technologies and new historical eras.

PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Nostalgic audiences play a crucial role in the survival of racist images across multiple media, a fact often marginalized within more utopian articulations of reception practices. One such conception is Jenkins's notion of "participatory culture," a cultural shift whereby "consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" as a result of these transmedia worlds. *Convergence Culture* presents one of the most recognized models for examining the relationship between media producers and audience behavior in an age of corporate horizontal integration and transmedia intellectual property. Working from Pierre Lévy's theories on "collective intelligence," Jenkins argues that the Internet, with its seemingly endless networks of blogs, forums, and forms of social media, provides an ideal platform for people with shared interests to go online and pool their accumulative knowledge of a given subject. Online communities, Jenkins believes, are "held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge." Everyone can contribute pieces of information to the larger group and, in turn, share in the benefits of such accumulative comprehension. Collective intelligence, he writes, "refers to this ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members. What we cannot know or do on our own, we may now be able to do collectively."[37] Moreover, according to Jenkins, these online communities force media producers to stay honest in how they negotiate audience participation, for fear of organized rejection or reprisal.

Although digital participatory culture has simplified some forms of communication within various audience communities and with me-

dia gatekeepers, it would be inaccurate to presume an equal, or even relatively democratic, power relationship between potential participants. Economic and cultural status invariably dictates which audiences can interact more easily. Meanwhile, media companies have become increasingly savvy about shaping, limiting, and controlling the relatively modest ways in which consumers can contribute. And especially with a major entertainment giant such as Disney, access and participation are often defined through purchasing power. It is difficult to accept unquestionably the idea that "the age of media convergence enables communal, rather than individualistic, modes of reception." Given how many platforms—literal and symbolic—each individual consumer has at her or his disposal these days, physical and intellectual isolation would seem a very real possibility. While Jenkins expresses a complicated view of these issues, he places critical approaches to convergence in a binary: critical pessimism and critical utopianism. One can choose to be either cynical or optimistic about the intentions of media conglomerates, and about the democratic potential of collective audiences. Much of *Convergence Culture*'s optimism is rooted in the belief that more media platforms will spell greater opportunities and interaction for producers and users to both expand and contest existing media content. The transmedia dispersion of content inspires a certain "epistemophilia,"[38] a love for seeking out knowledge and reconnecting information that motivates fans, bloggers, and other users.

In the age of media convergence, knowledge not only expands—more often it *dissipates*, becoming less and less coherent. The vastness of new media just as easily reinforces ignorance when audiences seek out like-minded folks online and settle down in ideological echo chambers. It is true, as Jenkins notes, that "knowledge becomes power in the age of media convergence,"[39] but willful *ignorance* can be just as potent. The recent online behavior of *Song of the South* fans, as I document in the final chapter, is testament to such a particularly ugly subdivision of participatory culture today. Various media content—their stories, images, and cultural histories—can just as often scatter across these transmediated landscapes as a result of the collective diligence of fans and media conglomerates, especially in the case of problematic works such as *Song of the South*. Meanwhile, particular, isolated ideas can momentarily intensify during their occasional reappearances. This is not to suggest that there are narrow truths to be maintained in the history of transmediated texts. Rather, I wish to emphasize that the inner workings and ambiguities of convergence culture hide as much as they reveal—a complicated,

contradictory process in which both media producers and audiences play a key role. *Song of the South*'s transmediated ubiquity—as both a property for Disney to carefully exploit and repurpose, and a beloved text for fans to defend—has for the moment dissipated the immense cultural and racial legacies contained within it.

Does epistemophilia, the collective drive to learn ever more and share that knowledge with others, best describe audience behavior in the age of convergence? Or does the repetition and fragmentation of transmedia worlds allow fans and media producers to simplify interests in a particular text down to only that which matters the most to them? Many *Song of the South* fans go online not to expand their understanding of the film, but rather to have their own interpretation *reaffirmed*. In the process, they align themselves with other sympathizers to shut out anyone who expands comprehension of the film's cultural histories and racial ideologies in *unsightly* directions. Such fans may be motivated at times by a desire to know more about the film—its production history, distribution practices, and so forth. Yet they are not always open-minded toward the wealth of knowledge that the Internet provides about their beloved cult object. Which approach (collective intelligence or transmedia dissipation) is more relevant to audiences and media corporations in the age of convergence culture? They seem equally valid, but also inadequate in isolation. A renewed emphasis on *ambivalence* for the convergence scholar—that newer media present both utopian and dystopian possibilities, that audience behavior is reactionary and indifferent as often as it is progressive—is required. In either case, such an evaporation of certain narrative and thematic content across platforms has considerable cultural and political implications, the historical and cultural gaps that new media theories have thus far been reluctant to approach. What I propose is transmedia storytelling's more frequent, ambivalent side effect—transmedia dissipation.

DISNEY'S HISTORIES
OF CONVERGENCE

As a company with a trailblazing history of convergence, Disney deserves renewed attention. They maximized the processes of media convergence several decades ago, building the "Disney universe" long before it became commonplace to talk about the interaction between media industries and platforms. They were particularly apt at

crafting what Gray recently called media's "paratextuality,"[40] a film or television show's ubiquitous presence throughout a universe of ancillary material (books, records, and so forth), which were traditionally seen as doing little more than highlighting and promoting a given text's release. Since its inception in the early decades of the twentieth century, Disney carefully exploited ancillary markets and dedicated fan bases while shrewdly reusing old material. "An intrepid entrepreneur as well as a storyteller," observes Patricia Turner, "Disney delivered much more than the stories themselves. This dimension of his influence began in the 1930s, when he signed an agreement allowing a manufacturer to inscribe Mickey Mouse's image on a note pad. Today the mouse reigns over a battalion of Disney-spawned items."[41] Disney understood early on the power of expanding its media reach across every possible media platform available, as a means to both expand and exploit its rich vault of entertainment stories. Most famously, in the 1950s Disney was able to parlay its library of feature-length and short subject films into an agreement with ABC for *Disneyland* (1954), a television program that also paid for the famous theme park of the same name in Southern California. The ABC show was also one of the first venues the company used to recycle its wide variety of old content for a new audience (*The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, *Seal Island*, clips from feature-length films, and so forth)—another twist on Disney's successively selective distribution practices. "Long after many of the major studios had sold TV rights to their films," writes Anderson, "the Disneys boasted that they still owned every film they made."[42] With the exception of low-budget live action pieces such as the *Davy Crockett* phenomenon and "Uncle" Walt's introductions, much of the show was repurposed archival material. These parks and TV shows pushed traditional boundaries of film studies "toward a more pervasive sense of textuality," and offer an early glimpse into histories of convergence.

In particular, the media giant's success since the 1920s has been based on two premises that are today the cornerstones of studies in convergence: technological innovation and extensive cross-promotion among numerous texts. On one trajectory, as J. P. Telotte most recently explored, Disney long positioned itself at the cutting edge of experimentation in film technologies. The company, "in order to survive in an increasingly competitive environment," he writes, "repeatedly had to innovate or adopt new technologies or move into new media forms."[43] This included advances in music and sound synchronization (*Steamboat Willie*, 1928), three-strip Technicolor (*Flowers and Trees*, 1932), character animation (*Three Little Pigs*, 1933), the multi-plane camera (*The Old Mill*, 1937),

theatrical exhibition surround sound (*Fantasia*, 1940), hybrid animation (*Song of the South*, 1946), widescreen CinemaScope (*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, 1954), television synergy (*Disneyland*, 1954), computer-generated imagery, or CGI (*TRON*, 1982), subscription cable television (Disney Channel, 1983), and computer-aided animation production (*The Rescuers*, 1990). More important, even when the newness was overstated, such as with *Steamboat Willie* or *20,000 Leagues*, the company was aggressive in promoting itself and the perceived novelty of these various new technologies and multimedia advances. While the company is viewed today largely as a media empire built on nostalgia and conservatism, at its core is an impressive, if also often accidental, history of future-oriented technological and economic innovations.

At first, Disney relied on partnerships with other companies to help spread its brand and its merchandise, since its modest revenue allowed for little ambition beyond animated films. As early as the late 1920s, the company was licensing the rights to Mickey Mouse's likeness to a variety of businesses—a move that was largely motivated by the need for money to offset Walt's often-reckless investments in film production. The same economic logic motivated Disney's agreement with ABC on *Disneyland*, as well as with Golden Books and others, in the 1950s. The goal was as much to pay the theme park's spiraling costs as to spread the company's brand recognition. Another key early business innovation involved Disney's partnership with Capitol Records to circulate and promote its various film soundtracks and other kid-marketed records in the 1940s. This was a time when, as Jacob Smith has documented, "children's records experienced a remarkable surge" in general.[44] Notable as well was their subsequent collaboration with the NBC network and RCA Television in the 1960s to exploit Disney's desire for color broadcasts, beginning the notable run of *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color* (1961). By the time Disney was dominating the television landscape, the company had become self-sustaining enough to control its own ancillary revenue streams, operating its own distributor for theatrical exhibition (Buena Vista) and for books and records (Disneyland). This emergent ubiquity planted the seed early on for a U.S. cultural environment in which Disney was now perceived as having "always" been "everywhere"—a socially constructed logic of media consumption that paid off for the company in the long run, and continues to do so.

Through these ancillary channels, retrospectively, Disney increasingly promoted its own revised studio history as a landmark in the annals of classic Hollywood, further cementing its cultural status as an American

institution. This prominence, plus its long history of cross-promotional ambitions, paid huge dividends by the time Michael Eisner, Frank Wells, and Jeffrey Katzenberg took over in the 1980s. A central goal of "Team Disney" was to further exploit revenue streams such as home video platforms (VHS) and new theme parks and attractions (Tokyo Disneyland), and increase corporate partnerships with companies such as Delta Air Lines and McDonald's. Another key business strategy in the 1980s was to idealize Disney's own studio history, and the larger history of classic Hollywood that images of Uncle Walt and *Fantasia* Mickey inevitably evoked. There was perhaps no bigger embodiment of this strategy than the building of Disney-MGM Studios in Florida at the end of 1980s (now called "Disney's Hollywood Studios"). The third Orlando theme park spatialized Disney's desire to memorialize and idealize its own history, so crucial to the company's nostalgic appeal. It also rewrote Hollywood's heyday as being largely defined by the presence of Disney.

Ironically, the park's depiction of the "golden age" of Hollywood is completely inaccurate. Disney mostly struggled to stay alive through the 1940s and early 1950s—the generic time period that becomes historical pastiche as the overall mise-en-scène of Disney's Hollywood Studios. The 1940s was not a period of prosperity, but rather one of deep financial struggles, marked in particular by the terrible labor strike in the studio and the disastrous theatrical fortunes for *Fantasia*. There is no shortage of historical irony in the fact that a grotesquely large version of the Mickey sorcerer's hat now serves as the central image of promotion for Disney's classic Hollywood–themed amusement park. The cap evokes memories of Walt Disney's biggest theatrical fiasco, the movie that—had it not been for government funding of the studio during World War II—would have bankrupted the Disney company and sent most of their work to the dustbin of film history. Even at the height of its early phenomenal success in the 1930s, Disney was never more than a minor studio—a cottage industry that specialized in state-of-the-art animation, but which was dependent on other, often-bigger companies for technological innovation, for repurposing, and for distribution. They did not hold a candle, in prestige, revenue, or sheer output, to Hollywood giants such as Warner Bros., Twentieth Century Fox, MGM, and so forth. The name change in 2008 to "Disney's Hollywood Studios" even more explicitly rewrites history to suggest that Disney's golden age and the classic studio system's golden age were one and the same.

One of the main critiques often leveled at the Disney empire for decades has been its distortion of history.[45] Disney's romanticized view of

its own past, as the self-appointed king of the golden age of Hollywood, is one thing. Yet more disturbing is its rewriting of American history in general. Whether it is Frontierland's romanticizing of the American West, *Pocahontas*'s absurd representation of colonial America, or *Song of the South*'s mythologizing of the post–Civil War South, Disney has a long record of distorting the U.S. collective past in a way that troubles modern awareness of economic, gender, and racial struggles in American history. Disney's fondness for rewriting American history, often to the benefit of white, middle-class consumers, came to a head in the 1990s, when cultural critics, historians, and political activists successfully pressured the company to abandon plans for a history-themed amusement park in Virginia, to be called "Disney's America." In questionable taste, this endeavor would have awkwardly mixed Disney's own idealization and whitewashing of history with the uglier history of the surrounding areas, which feature countless institutionalized reminders of the country's violent colonial and Civil War legacies. Aside from exploiting these tragedies for profit, Disney's distortion of history could condition audiences to believe that its representations of the past are really "the way it was." We see this appeal to history prominently in defenses of *Song of the South*—not only the nineteenth century inaccurately depicted in the film itself, but also in the separate history of the film's exhibition, recirculation, and repurposing. Yet what is often referred to in this regard is not really history, but nostalgia.

FORMS OF DISNEY NOSTALGIA

Increasingly, in trying to analyze Disney's relationship to the past, there emerges a blurry line between history and nostalgia. Nostalgia is a central component to the appeal and popularity of *Song of the South*, but it takes many different forms throughout the film's history of recirculation. On a basic level, history is an attempt to truthfully document and represent the historical past to the best of one's verifiable knowledge. Nostalgia, on the other hand, is a romantic idealization of the past that is more interested in the emotional needs and fantasies of the present. In her recent study on *Gone with the Wind*, Molly Haskell suggested that audiences' investment in politically difficult texts are further complicated by a natural tendency to remember, or misremember, films in a way that privileges what people *wish* to remember about them. "How something so full of contradiction and dissonance appears

so seamless and has proved so enduring," she writes, "is a mystery made possible by our investment in the fantasy [the film evokes for its audience], often correcting or 'improving' on the book or movie."[46] Nostalgia is a simplifying, deeply affective attachment to a past time and place that is by its very definition an illusory utopia.

But there are many different types of nostalgia associated with *Song of the South*, which collectively suggest just how deeply nostalgic the film is. There is first the *representational* nostalgia in the film's narrative itself—the idyllic presentation of plantation culture in the nineteenth-century U.S. South. What we see in the film is less a historically accurate portrait of the time in which it was set, and more the embodiment of white conservative nostalgia for the perception of that way of life. In 1946, audiences critically and uncritically focused on this aspect of *Song of the South*'s nostalgic impulses, because it seemed to cut to the core of the film's problematic appeal to the return of a certain racial hierarchy.

Over time, other types of nostalgia began to enter the picture. As *Song of the South* migrated into the 1970s and beyond, a more *affective* nostalgia also emerged, which was less tied to the film's representation of the past and more tied to audiences' potential personal memories of the film. It is also tied to nostalgia for *Song of the South*–related ancillary materials, such as the Golden Books, which in turn deepened their affective connection to the primary film. By 1972 the film made some people nostalgic for various aspects of the 1940s and 1950s, just as today the continuing (bootleg) circulation of the film makes still others nostalgic for the 1970s and 1980s. There is a warm attachment to some aspect of their past—memories of a place, a person, or a moment—that *Song of the South* affectively triggers without being directly connected to it on a representational level. This is perhaps ultimately the most powerful form of nostalgia connected to this and many other Disney films. But we should not make the mistake of assuming that this nostalgia is automatically an idiosyncratic or natural phenomenon unique to particular individuals.

On the contrary, affective attachments to an older Disney film such as *Song of the South* are also deeply embedded in the larger form of *manufactured* nostalgia, which has been key to the company's long-term success. Nostalgia was not always crucial to the company's financial fortunes. In the 1930s, Disney distinguished its brand of animation through technological innovations such as three-strip Technicolor and use of the multi-plane camera. This product differentiation resulted in lifting Disney to the status of a cultural phenomenon by the time *Snow White* hit

theaters in 1937. Since at least the 1950s, however, the company's success has been consistently rooted in promoting nostalgia for its own products. The countless rereleases of its major feature-length films is only the most obvious example. The primary appeal of the *Disneyland* television show debuting in 1954, for instance, was not the chance to be sold on a new theme park being built in Anaheim. Rather, it was the opportunity to watch for free the old films and clips that nostalgic audiences had not seen in ten or twenty years. That was the hook to get people interested in the Disneyland theme park. With relatively mild variations, this is essentially the same business model Disney has used ever since—promote direct and indirect appeals to the company's past in order to sell new stuff in the present. The Eisner-era Disney of the 1980s and 1990s was particularly shrewd in this regard.

Meanwhile, nostalgia also becomes important to shaping and sustaining ritualistic behaviors on the part of audiences. Whole families of Disney fans—which is also part of the company's manufactured nostalgia—begin to emerge and reproduce, creating seemingly limitless waves of generational nostalgia, which the company can and will continue to foster and exploit. To a certain degree, fans who have felt nostalgic for *Song of the South*, and then worked through those feelings of nostalgia by re-watching the film, purchasing related official memorabilia, and so forth, are simply acting out a consumerist role the company has actively crafted for audiences in relation to countless Disney titles. And even though the film is out of official circulation now, Disney's continuing use of parts such as "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" throughout its media empire also maintains nostalgia for the film and for the larger, Walt-era, "classic Hollywood" history of the company its memory now evokes.

The consumption practices of Disney audiences evoke a more basic distinction between *private* and *public* forms of nostalgia. Private includes one's own personal attachment to the film, and the idiosyncratic reasons for the appeal. It can also involve a specific memory or a relationship to a particular family member that otherwise has nothing to do with Disney. On the other hand, Disney's general promotion of its own past, and the ways it maximizes that for material and profit, is a public nostalgia not reducible to a single person or memory. Likewise, something such as *Song of the South*'s idyllic, illusory presentation of Southern history is another form of public nostalgia, as generations at different times embraced the plantation myth in Hollywood films. These are often interrelated, but not synonymous, forms of nostalgia. One can have a personal attachment to *Song of the South* that exists within a mutu-

ally reaffirming relationship with the company's promotion of a public, consumer-driven nostalgia. But one can also be nostalgic for the film in a way that contradicts the company's official policies and practices. This is most prevalent, for instance, in the fan activities today where people circulate illegal versions of *Song of the South* online and through bootleg DVDs,[47] since Disney refuses to release it officially. At the same time, any fan who insists now on having an unauthorized copy of the film just so that they can show it to their child or grandchild is still, knowingly or not, complicit in Disney's larger strategies of manufactured nostalgia, which work to ensure a new generation of consumers. This final irony, along with their reluctance to call attention to the film, may help shed light on why Disney has been unusually lax in cracking down on copyright violations regarding *Song of the South*.

CHAPTERS

Disney's Most Notorious Film resists a linear history of the Disney film, instead using its habitual reappearances as focal points for layered, accumulative histories regarding transmedia properties, race relations, and participatory culture in the twentieth-century United States. I look at each moment of *Song of the South*'s interpretation and remediation in relation to what I am calling its fluid *conditions of possibility*— what any given complete or fragmented version, in various moments of reception, meant in relation to its own historical time and cultural contexts. I also include a consideration of what trajectories it then created (or creates) for future reception. In addition to analyzing various versions of *Song of the South*, my research draws heavily on periodicals, such as newspaper and magazine articles from the past, in order to articulate as complete a vision as possible of the specific historical moments in question. This means that my work often depends on the writings of columnists, critics, spokespersons, and other people in positions of power. While such critics and activists reveal a limited, even elitist, view of certain events, which risks marginalizing others, they nonetheless provide a valuable historical glimpse into particular cultural attitudes of the past. Moreover, they are balanced out, when possible, by a wider range of general audiences, who increasingly found effective venues for expression over the decades—from letters to the editor in the 1940s to Internet forums today.

The first chapter, "Conditions of Possibility: The Disney Studios,

Postwar 'Thermidor,' and the Ambivalent Origins of *Song of the South*," articulates the historical conditions out of which the film originally emerged. Drawing on Neal Gabler's archival work on Disney at the time, Thomas Cripps's historical reading of Hollywood's representations of African Americans, and Robert Ray's theories on classic Hollywood ideologies, the first chapter examines the film's ambivalent origins as the product of a struggling postwar studio (Disney) that was attempting to mix its own trademark animation and musical style with the 1930s cycle of Southern melodramas, most popularly realized in Selznick's *Gone with the Wind*. Even after the film was made, some inside Disney doubted the wisdom of releasing a movie that would be seen as racially problematic, especially at a time when Hollywood and the U.S. federal government had made a conscious effort to empower African Americans by moving away from many of the old cinema stereotypes regarding race. But the film's own textual negotiation of live action, animation, and an extensive musical soundtrack made *Song of the South* a problematically affective and self-contradictory text from the start. Hence I argue that the film's inherent textual incoherence would lead to contradictory audience responses in subsequent decades.

Next, in "'Put Down the Mint Julep, Mr. Disney': Postwar Racial Consciousness and Disney's Critical Legacy in the 1946 Reception of *Song of the South*," I closely examine 1940s periodicals, such as the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Defender*, and the *New York Times*, to offer the first thorough historical account of the film's harsh reception in 1946, which was shaped by not only disappointed film critics but also frustrated civil rights groups. I vehemently argue against any modern-day perception that *Song of the South* was ever "just a product of its time." While the responses were not monolithic among any audience group, *Song of the South* was, overall, criticized at worst and dismissed at best. Film critics, such as Bosley Crowther, were disappointed on not only cultural but also aesthetic grounds, reading the partially animated *Song of the South* as a cheap imitation of what they saw as the usually innovative Disney visual style they had embraced in the 1930s and early 1940s. Cultural critics were even harsher, seeing *Song of the South* as a direct slap in the face to the emergent civil rights movement. Even general film audiences were sensitive to its offensive "Uncle Tom" representations in the immediate aftermath of U.S. racial progress and Nazi white supremacist rhetoric during World War II. Given this response, *Song of the South* was seemingly destined for the dustbin of Hollywood's racist past by the 1950s. Yet by the early 1970s all that had shifted.

The third chapter, "'Our Most Requested Movie': Media Convergence, Black Ambivalence, and the Reconstruction of *Song of the South*," offers a detailed historical explanation for why *Song of the South* was suddenly regarded as Disney's "most requested" title by the 1970s. On the one hand, I discuss the decline of the civil rights movement's institutional power, and the concurrent rise of the conservative white backlash and white flight trends, as documented by Doug McAdam. While white audiences were much more sympathetic to racial inequities right after the sobering Fascist rhetoric and actions of World War II, there was considerably less support by the 1960s. Meanwhile, Disney's own rise institutionally was just as significant. This chapter offers a historical variation on Gray's theory of the media paratext, and closely explores how Disney's long history of media convergence—television shows, children's books, musical records, and so forth—worked over subsequent decades to resuscitate *Song of the South*'s critical and cultural reputation. Many audiences, some of whom never even saw the film in theaters originally, grew up watching, listening to, and reading Disney's version of the Brer Rabbit stories in their homes, schools, church youth groups, and so forth. This transmediated presence, throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, fundamentally altered some audiences' general perception of the film, shifting from an anachronistic Uncle Tom Hollywood melodrama to the socially constructed perception of its status as a "beloved" Disney family institution. Thus, by the time it reappeared in 1972, especially on the heels of the white backlash, *Song of the South* was suddenly Disney's biggest box office rerelease to that point.

Yet, as the film began to endure past its initial shelf life, this reemergence was also met with criticism and satire. Chapter 4, "A Past That Never Existed: *Coonskin*, Post-racial Whiteness, and Rewriting History in the Era of Reaganism," more closely examines the political climate underlying *Song of the South*'s sudden popularity in the new anti–civil rights era of the 1970s and 1980s. The Disney film's sudden appeal was deeply rooted in a conservative desire to undermine the political and cultural gains made by African Americans in the preceding three decades. Exploring a range of texts from the period, this chapter documents how both critics and supporters of *Song of the South* explicitly posited its continuing theatrical success as symptomatic of a new conservatism overtaking the country. I begin with a brief discussion of Ralph Bakshi's *Coonskin* (1974), an explicit, adult-rated satire of both *Song of the South* and the subgenre of "blaxploitation." Though it failed to find an audience, *Coonskin* visually demonstrated a scathing cultural critique of the con-

servative appeal of *Song of the South* in the 1970s. Given its antagonistic style, however, Bakshi's film raised more questions than answers about white racial consciousness and progressive activism, issues that became more acute as the Disney film endured into the next decade.

By 1980 *Song of the South*'s popularity was explicitly tied to the election of Ronald Reagan. In contrast to the post–World War II activism of the 1940s, a new generation of Disney fans defended the film passionately. Criticism from Bakshi and activist groups such as the Anti-Racism Coalition was met by stronger counter-resistance, as younger audiences who had been raised on the film itself, and on Disney's transmediated universe, came to its defense. Following the president's lead, this generation saw its own personal memories, and Disney's self-built heritage as family entertainment, as a substitute for objective accounts of collective historical events. Their own fond nostalgia for *Song of the South* became more important than any institutional history of racism or racial inequality. It is during this period that we see the emergence of a more resilient form of post-racial whiteness, what I have termed an "evasive whiteness," that reinforces racial privilege by denying the existence of any racial categories. Thus any acknowledgment of *Song of the South*'s representation of institutional racism and white racist nostalgia is rejected, reframed as itself a racist take on an otherwise color-blind children's film. Befitting the era of Reagan, *Song of the South*'s narrative becomes reappropriated by supporters as an image of racial utopia.

On the heels of the white backlash and the conservative culture of Reaganism, *Song of the South* was a potentially rewarding but tricky property to exploit, especially since "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" had since become an integral part of the Disney brand of white, middle-class family entertainment. Since *Song of the South* presented a long-term risk to a company now under the direction of Michael Eisner, Disney began to dissociate itself from the film by the late 1980s. Chapter 5, "On Tar Babies and Honey Pots: Splash Mountain, 'Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah,' and the Transmedia Dissipation of *Song of the South*," documents how Disney strategically remediated its problematic intellectual property into other profitable media platforms—versions of *Song of the South* that played up the affective and animated portions of the film while downplaying its most overtly racist live action content. These include everything from VHS sing-along tapes (1986) to Xbox 360's *Kinect Disneyland Adventures* (2011). Using material from the period and from Internet discussions of the ride today, this chapter focuses in particular on the many iterations of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" itself, as well as the theme park attraction

Splash Mountain. Disney's ambitious thrill ride rewrote the narrative of the film by replacing the "Tar Baby," which ensnares Brer Rabbit, with a pot of honey. This water log ride reflected a revised version of an old film that the company otherwise had no interest in continuing to rerelease. Far from unconditionally embracing its catalog of socially constructed "classics," Disney shrewdly maximized the film's remaining market value through the company's ubiquitous transmedia empire, while also keeping the overtly racist full-length version locked up in the proverbial Disney vault.

The final chapter, "Reassuring Convergence: New Media, Nostalgia, and the Internet Fandom of *Song of the South*," documents Disney fandom's recent online behavior in support of the film. Working off Boym's theories on modernity and nostalgia, and Jenkins's work on contemporary fandom and participatory culture, this section considers the racial and cultural implications of *Song of the South*'s continuing presence online. As a new century began, many of the older discourses of a Reaganist, post-racial whiteness persisted, even while Disney strategically remediated the old Uncle Remus film nearly out of existence. The official absence of *Song of the South* has only created a textual vacuum in the twenty-first century, which fans of the film have filled through the newer media platform of the Internet. I document fans' actions online, where they contest any charges of *Song of the South*'s racism, circulate partial excerpts or whole copies of the movie through YouTube, file sharing, or bootleg DVDs, and actively advocate for the film's official rerelease on home video formats. In many ways, Disney's decision to shelve the nearly seventy-year-old *Song of the South* has only worked to intensify its notoriety.

In the conclusion, I answer the question most often asked of me at conferences while presenting parts of my research: What do *I* personally think of *Song of the South*? Specifically, do I think Disney should rerelease the film today? This book is a historical–materialist reception study of *Song of the South*, the Disney Corporation, its various paratexts, its alternatingly critical and supportive audiences, and its richly diverse historical contexts. As such, I made an effort to set aside my own personal thoughts in favor of articulating the historical and cultural contexts that explain why certain groups saw the film the way they did, on particular media platforms, and at particular moments in time. For reasons of access and dialogue, I personally feel that Disney should make *Song of the South* available—to generate focused discussion about why it's offensive, to defuse both fan activism and obnoxious feelings of self-

righteous indignation, and to bring the ugly text back out into the open. I have no interest in seeing Disney validate the politics of the notoriously racist film, even if they would profit further from it. Yet as the book will show, removing the film from circulation has not ever really achieved the intended effect either. In any event, based on the film's varied history, whatever happens will not be the final word on the subject.

One   CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY

*The Disney Studios, Postwar "Thermidor," and
the Ambivalent Origins of* Song of the South

> *The [literary] Remus stories are a monument to the
> South's ambivalence. Harris, the archetypical South-
> erner, sought the Negro's love, and pretended he had
> received it (Remus's grin). But he sought the Negro's
> hate too (Brer Rabbit). . . . Harris's inner split—and
> the South's, and white America's—is mirrored in the
> fantastic disparity between Remus's beaming face and
> Brer Rabbit's acts. And such aggressive acts increasingly
> emanate from the grin, along with the hamburgers, the
> shoeshines, the "happifyin'" pancakes.*
>
> BERNARD WOLFE, "UNCLE REMUS AND
> THE MALEVOLENT RABBIT" (1949)

Among such sources today as conservative film criticism
and general fan discourses, the most often repeated popular platitude
regarding the film's racism is that Walt Disney's *Song of the South* was
from a different time, and thus must be accepted within the historical
context of the 1940s. But such assertions invariably distort the compli-
cated and ambivalent contexts of the film's first release. In a way, *Song of
the South* was *always* "of a different time"—that is, it was anachronistic
even when it was made. Writing at the end of the 1940s about the film
and about Joel Chandler Harris's original stories (first published in 1880),
Bernard Wolfe argued that white interest in the stories of Brer Rabbit was
always founded on a fundamental ambivalence.[1] Uncle Remus reflected
a fear of black anger regarding centuries of enslavement, coexisting with
a need by whites to be accepted or even loved by African Americans to
alleviate the guilt over that past. In the 1940s, this white ambivalence
that had long accompanied Harris's stories migrated with its cinematic
adaptation. This time, however, the split between fear and love became

even more acute for both white and black audiences—something that responses to the film at the time and over the next six decades would reflect. After World War II, *Song of the South* was immersed in a culture of ambivalence regarding racial progress in the United States. The notion that Disney's film was just another work that reflected a "typically" racist environment is simply untrue.

Any single text reception study must begin with a detailed overview of the film itself—not a rigorous textual analysis, but an account of the complicated and contradictory contexts out of which it originally emerged. This chapter examines the ambivalent conditions of historical, technological, and ideological possibility surrounding *Song of the South* when it was first made and released in 1946. By "conditions of possibility," I mean the various circumstances that potentially influenced both filmmakers and audiences of the time. Moreover, they also serve as a guide for scholars today attempting to map the subsequent accumulation and dissipation of ideological readings. Since films work within existing audience beliefs, it is problematic to talk of a text's inherent a priori ideology. At the same time, as this chapter explores, a film can lay the foundation that, in the long term, helps activate, and account for, future readings. Any detailed reception history of a resilient classical Hollywood film such as *Song of the South* cannot offer a definitive linear narrative of racial progress or regression. Instead, the repetition, redundancy, and shifts in its recirculation offer only momentary, historically specific glimpses into how particular audiences saw a film whose meaning is always in flux.

This chapter begins by exploring the history of African American representation in Hollywood up to the 1940s, followed by a brief discussion of World War II's impact on these stereotypes. Thanks to the efforts of the Office of War Information and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Hollywood moved briefly away from the plantation stereotypes that *Song of the South* would bring back. Such progress was offset by what Thomas Cripps has identified as a period of "thermidor."[2] This refers to the conservative backlash, in which *Song of the South* had a visible presence, to the otherwise progressive wartime period. Next, this chapter examines the Disney company at this time—the early "ideological" success with *Three Little Pigs* (1933) during the Great Depression; the negotiation with scientific discourses on the American "child" (as discussed in the work of Nicholas Sammond); the economic woes experienced in the late 1930s and 1940s; and the learning experience of working extensively with live action as part of its pro-

paganda projects for the U.S. government (military training films, *Salu-dos Amigos* [1942], *Victory Through Air Power* [1943], etc.). Finally, I look briefly at *Song of the South* itself as a filmic text, an example of Disney's early experimental work with feature-length "hybrid animation." I hope to illuminate both its own grotesque *textual* incoherence, which reflects multiple production influences and contexts, and its *affective* potential as a colorful Hollywood musical.

My brief exploration of *Song of the South*'s various textual features here does not attempt to pin down the film's true "meaning." Quite the opposite, each quality complicates any simple attempt to read the film's ideology then or now. As such, this chapter does not look at the film's reception, as later chapters will in depth. Rather, it sorts out that which the passage of time has too easily distorted—namely, the massive web of historical, industrial, thematic, affective, and textual contexts directly related to the inception of *Song of the South* in the 1940s. This ambivalent environment laid the groundwork for often conflicting and varied responses to the film over the subsequent seven decades. At the heart of this convergence history stands an inherently conflicted and incoherent text. *Song of the South*'s reception history is not only a matter of how shrewd promotional strategies and devoted audiences both exploited and concealed a racist text across a wide range of rereleases and paratexts. It is also the story of how a classic Hollywood text lends itself to such ambiguity at the same time that it reinforces racist assumptions by virtue of its characters and setting. Thus such contradictions should not gloss over how *Song of the South* was also, as Cripps noted, an explicit product of post–World War II conservatism.

CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY
AND THE DIFFICULTIES
OF FILM "IDEOLOGY"

Any account of the film's history, and of the larger technological and cultural issues it activates, must begin by establishing a better sense of *Song of the South*'s origins. This understanding becomes muddled with the passing of decades, a fading awareness of the twentieth-century civil rights movement, and the intensification of various nostalgias—both personal and market-driven. The result today is populist defenses of the film that betray a deep distortion of the climate in which *Song of the South* was made. In *Multiculturalism and the*

Mouse, Douglas Brode recently attempted to offset decades of criticism for the film's racial politics by insisting that *Song of the South* instead "be analyzed and understood in terms of the time in which [Disney's] movie was made."[3] The resulting argument is a familiar and problematic one—*Song of the South* was not any more offensive than most Hollywood films of the 1940s. It is a reassuring position, wrapped in a nostalgia that offers beneath its surface a strangely contradictory image of twentieth-century American history. Here, the past is both harmlessly naïve yet transparently racist. *Multiculturalism and the Mouse* goes further still, positing that *Song of the South* was one of many Disney films during this time that were actually highly progressive. They even anticipated, the argument goes, the subsequent 1960s civil rights movement. This over-looks how reactionary the film was in the wake of World War II and the war's impact on Hollywood's representation of African Americans. It also ignores how the civil rights movement began in the mid-1940s, before the film was made. If anything, the 1960s was marked by a conservative "white backlash," as I discuss in the third chapter, as much as by racial progress. The time in which *Song of the South* was made helps us to better understand the film and its detrimental impact on racial relations in the United States, but it does not excuse the film itself.

In a section titled "Nirvana in the New South," Brode begins by suggesting that, at the time of *Song of the South*'s initial release, criticism of the movie was largely restricted to misguided white liberals, and that black audiences reacted quite positively. Brode quotes the noted film historian Thomas Cripps's opinion of the film as being a mistimed but "otherwise admirable effort."[4] In fact, Cripps's attitude toward *Song of the South* was much more critical. As I discuss in the next chapter, Cripps offered a detailed description in *Making Movies Black* of the noble, if unsuccessful, attempts by several African Americans to boycott *Song of the South* in particular, and to establish it as indicative of Hollywood's postwar failure to positively represent their community.[5] Brode implies that African Americans then (and now) do not really have a problem with the film. If anything, he argues, it is white liberals who have criticized the film out of existence.

Ultimately, Brode's defense of *Song of the South* rests on the speculation that Walt himself intended Uncle Remus as a *subversion* of the Uncle Tom stereotype. "[Disney] sensed that to utterly abandon the Tom and Mammy icons would disorient a mainstream audience," Brode asserts.[6] Yet even before then, Hollywood had already made an effort to

stop reusing racist stereotypes during World War II, under pressure from the NAACP and the OWI. The U.S. government did not wish to see such subservient representations undermine civilian morale, or echo the white supremacist rhetoric of Nazis, during a war effort when every man and woman's dedication was needed. Brode argues that Uncle Remus created a landmark image, one that "paved the way for future African American characters—and the actors playing them—to in time become the focus of Hollywood movies."[7] Such an argument, about how subjectively "positive" *Song of the South* was as an image of racial relations in the 1940s, rests on an ironically ahistorical textual reading. There is little attempt to connect the film to other events in Hollywood and the United States at the time. *Song of the South* was not a cutting-edge subversion of the Uncle Tom stereotype in 1946. By 1940s standards, it was a shocking regression, a nostalgic appeal back to the racial attitudes and images represented in 1930s Hollywood plantation films.

Such basic textual readings of *Song of the South* thrive today because the film itself resists easy ideological categorization. Like many classic Hollywood films, *Song of the South* is structured as narratively, historically, and thematically ambiguous, even while depending on outdated stereotypes. What is both thoroughly offensive and maddeningly elusive about *Song of the South* is that it represents a mythical time in the American South that never existed. Instead of an accurate and coherent representation of pre– or post–Civil War Georgia, we have a consciously dehistoricized, conflict-free romanticization of idyllic plantation life. Over time, later audiences would come to see such images as an accurate, if unfortunate, depiction of American history precisely because they'd grown up with films such as *Song of the South* and *Gone with the Wind* as their only historical points of reference. *Song of the South* is rooted in easily identifiable stereotypes of African Americans. But the film also performs considerable affective work in the process of remaining symptomatically ambiguous.

In *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema*, Robert Ray suggested that postwar Hollywood was marked in no small part by an increasing awareness of a more diversified audience in terms of politics, aesthetics, and ethnicity. The result was a largely conservative movement toward films that contained both progressive and reactionary impulses—at formal and ideological levels—designed to reach the largest possible audiences. *Song of the South* represents an early example of this shift. It is an ideologically conservative film meant to be "inoffensive,"

and a modestly progressive *technological* achievement that mixed live ac-
tion and animation, flouting Hollywood norms. Meanwhile, it was also
wrapped around meekly liberal, if still problematic, images of harmoni-
ous racial relations that deliberately avoid their own historical context. At
its core, *Song of the South*'s racial politics must be understood in relation
to a larger Hollywood agenda wherein, according to Ray, "commercially
acceptable filmmaking . . . dictated the conversion of all political, socio-
logical, and economic dilemmas into personal melodramas." [8]

At a narrative level, *Song of the South* reduces the historical event of
World War II to what Ray, Jonathan Rosenbaum, and other film schol-
ars have called a "structuring absence." Cultural anxiety in the United
States over the fact that African Americans had gained a modicum of
agency and visibility during the war is diminished in *Song of the South*.
Disney's film offered a nostalgic narrative that reaffirmed a black per-
son's dependence on the white community, by way of a mystifying, con-
tradictory discourse of fear and affection. This echoes what Wolfe said
in 1949 about the Remus literary tales: they reconciled white guilt over
the legacy of slavery through the imagined approval and even love of
the Uncle Tom figure. Yet analyzing the film itself, or its structuring
absence, takes us only so far.

Highlighting its anachronistic, conservative subject matter does not
fully account for what the film does textually that lends itself to irrec-
oncilable readings, or for the complicated contexts in which it has ap-
peared. This requires a more nuanced understanding of the various
conditions of ideological, technological, affective, and historiographic
possibilities that accompanied the film in the course of its circulation.
"Conditions of possibility" speak to larger historical trends—the alternat-
ing accumulation and evaporation of potential ideologies and cultural
contexts across years and decades. Ideology is never inherent in a text,
nor is it directly "transmitted." A film does not change single-handedly
the ideological outlook of a particular person or a group of people, since
audiences bring to the cinema a bottomless well of preexisting disposi-
tions that influence their reaction. Yet this is not to suggest that films
cannot activate those prior attitudes in complicated ways.

Conditions of possibility also refer to the potential coexistence of
competing ideologies within the production of the text itself. While
moving in a conservative direction overall (as most Hollywood films
do), *Song of the South* is just ambiguous enough textually to lend it-
self to different cultural and political readings. Moreover, such lack of

a consistent ideology is complicated by other historical, affective, and interpretative factors within the film's discursive surround. Despite being uneventful upon its first release, *Song of the South* and its ideologies over time gained a considerable presence in American popular culture, to the point where today its offenses seem "natural" or "invisible" to some audiences. Ray argues that "Hollywood's power (and need) to produce a steady flow of variations provided the [American] myth [of individualism] with the repetitive elaborations that it required to become convincing."[9] The artificiality and arbitrariness of the classic Hollywood narrative structure—of which *Song of the South* is typical—came to *appear* seamless and invisible through continual redeployment. Moreover, as Ray notes, "by helping to create desires, by reinforcing ideological proclivities, by encouraging certain forms of action (or inaction), the movies worked to create the very same reality they then 'reflected.'"[10] Through the repetition and redundancy of its various forms of recirculation, *Song of the South*'s mythology of white privilege and institutional racism became *less* questioned and criticized over the years, because it had become its own reflected "reality." In other words, people criticized *Song of the South* harshly in 1946 because its anachronisms were more jarring to an audience that had just experienced the movie for the first time. This contrasts sharply with those later audiences who had spent their whole lives growing up surrounded by the film and by other Brer Rabbit–themed paratexts. For them, *Song of the South* just always "was."

Conditions of possibility define contemporary reading strategies—what was available to people (fans, writers, producers) in their time. It also refers to the media scholar's potential options for charting multiple, irreducible histories of the film's moments of circulation, and the thematic and discursive trajectories that accompany them. Whereas World War II provided conditions of possibility in the 1940s for audiences of *Song of the South*, the election of Ronald Reagan would offer very different ones in 1980. At the same time, while it is possible to focus on *Song of the South* as one post–World War II representation of race in the American South, it is also possible to chart an alternative trajectory. This is exactly what Ed Guerrero suggests doing with *The Foxes of Harrow* (1947).[11] Ideologically contested material in the media, like images of race and racial relations, do not emerge as a "timeless" representation—good or bad, positive or negative. *Song of the South* is not merely an anachronistic '40s Disney film, nor is it a positive statement containing elements of racial utopia. Those contradictory and irreducible ideologies

always coexist within the film's potential to affect a response. Single moments of reception work only as particular, historically contingent events that activate and perpetuate preexisting conditions of possibility.

New ideological responses rely not on what message is transmitted, then, but on the activation of preexisting conditions established through *redundancy*. Even though *Song of the South* was criticized upon its first release, those various readings were slowly replaced through the decades with alternate conditions. *Song of the South*'s repeated recirculation and repurposing raised the film's visibility, and subsequently created a more amendable environment for its *re*release. In later decades, different historical periods (white flight in the 1970s, Reaganism in the 1980s) emerged wherein such imaginary representations would find greater receptivity. Such responses always, in turn, create new possibilities. Audiences who grew up with the film in the 1980s, such as the network of *Song of the South* cult fans today, understand it only as a product of their own childhood nostalgia. This has nothing to do with the film's original release in 1946. Nostalgia for the film itself *today* is a significant part of the film's appeal. Yet these kinds of emotional responses were not possible in 1946, or even perhaps in 1956. Such nostalgia became a condition of possibility later through the film's recirculation, and through Disney's consistent promotion of it across several decades and media platforms.

Responses never just react to one preexisting condition, and never point back toward one isolated ideology. Understanding *Song of the South*'s long-term reception requires carefully balancing the conditions that led to a particular moment of interpretation: the dissipation of the film's historical distortions and racial inequalities over decades; the legacy of the Disney company as it morphed from a small, desperate Hollywood studio into a "sacred" American institution; an intensified appeal to *Song of the South*'s affective qualities; and a heightened awareness of the nostalgia that the film can and often does generate. All the perceived qualities that Disney initially promoted about the film—a heartwarming, fun, musical spectacle—did eventually come to define it for some, but this process was not immediate. The conditions that would promote *Song of the South*'s eventual success increased throughout the years, in part because of Disney's distribution persistence. *Song of the South* generally underwhelmed adults in 1946 and 1956. Yet the children who were watching the film with them were sometimes developing very different responses that would materialize discursively decades later. This creates a complicated dynamic whereby nostalgia benefits from that very same process—the continuing recirculation of *Song of the South*—which it

also helps to sustain. And such nostalgia distorts the historical contexts at the origins of the text.

PREWAR CINEMATIC STEREOTYPES AND POSTWAR THERMIDOR

Representations of blacks in *Song of the South* should first be understood as a response to World War II and other cinematic representations of African Americans in the 1940s. This is a valuable correction to the position that the film was progressive just because it featured a few African Americans and whites interacting within an affectively positive setting. While far from racially diverse, Hollywood had changed after World War II. Film scholars such as Michael Dunne have noted that Disney was hardly alone in its sentimentalized, nostalgic depiction of a romanticized South.[12] What sometimes gets forgotten is that Disney was one of the few studios to produce a film of this kind *after* World War II. In that sense, the company was too slow in attempting to cash in on the success of David O. Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* (1939), as it had originally hoped to do. The same propaganda effort that kept Disney financially afloat during the war also advocated in other venues for more visible and "positive" (non-stereotypical) representations of African Americans. This government activism ironically made the receptive cultural conditions for a conservative film like *Song of the South* even more difficult later on. With that precedent in mind, Disney was perhaps foolish to take on something like *Song of the South*. With the right sort of creative innovation (the addition of music and animation), however, the studio thought that such old representations could still work. But by 1946, the stereotypes, while far from gone, were outdated.

Such stereotypes had existed since the beginning of cinema itself. Donald Bogle writes in his landmark study of African Americans in Hollywood that "the five basic types [of stereotypes] . . . that were to dominate black characters for the next half-century were first introduced" during this time. These stereotypes thrived in part because of preexisting antecedents in theater and literature. Bogle's five categories are well-known: the "Tom," the "coon," the "tragic mulatto," the "mammy," and the "buck." These categories often framed subsequent discussions on the subject, including responses to *Song of the South* during its first theatrical appearance. Postwar audiences immediately recognized the "Uncle Tom" figure in Uncle Remus. Taken from the

title character of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "Toms" are subservient and loyal to whites. "Always as toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted," writes Bogle, "they keep the faith, n'er turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind. Thus they endear themselves to white audiences and emerge as heroes of sorts." Uncle Remus, meanwhile, was so distinctive a degrading stereotype that he merited his own subcategory. Bogle does not identify Remus so much as a Tom figure, but as a "coon," since the Disney character's primary function is to entertain rather than sacrifice his life. Instead of being noble and single-minded in purpose, as with the Tom, coons "appeared in a series of black films presenting the Negro as amusement object and black buffoon." According to Bogle, the coon breaks down into two additional categories—the "pickaninny" and the "Uncle Remus." The former is a silly and harmless child, while the latter a quaint, comical, and naïve variation on the Tom figure. "Before its death," writes Bogle, "the coon developed into the most blatantly degrading of all black stereotypes. The pure coons emerged as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language."[13]

In *Song of the South*, we see both of these "coon" stereotypes at work, along with McDaniel's "mammy"—the often-overweight maid, who is "distinguished [from coons] by her sex and her fierce independence."[14] Such autonomy is limited, however, to either keeping good-for-nothing husbands in line, or offering advice, solicited or otherwise, to the white women whom they often serve. As detailed through primary sources in the next chapter, resistant audiences during *Song of the South*'s first release were well aware of these stereotypes, and often framed their reception to the film through them. "Increasingly," wrote Wolfe in 1949, "Negroes themselves reject the mediating smile of Remus, the indirection of the Rabbit. . . . The grin is faltering, especially since the war."[15] Such resistance was countered by reactionary audiences, who sought reassurance in conservative representations of blacks as a means to offset perceived racial and cultural instability. The rejection by African Americans of these stereotypes, according to Wolfe, was "one of the reasons why, once more, the beaming Negro butler and Pullman porter are making their amiable way across our billboards, food labels and magazine ads—and Uncle Remus, 'fetching a grin from year to year,' is in the bigtime again."[16]

World War II was a significant moment in the civil rights struggle, as

the United States touted the propagandistic "Double V" strategy. This meant both an Allied victory over Fascism in Europe and Asia, and the victory over racism and other forms of discrimination at home. Because the United States needed the support of black workers and soldiers, Hollywood, the NAACP, and the OWI collaborated to produce more empowering images of African Americans, ones that broke free of those older stereotypes that Bogle described. This was seen in both fictional films (*Bataan*, 1943) and documentaries (*Henry Browne, Farmer*, 1942; *The Negro Soldier*, 1944). The modest progressive movement was followed again in the late '40s by a rash of "social consciousness" films—*Pinky* (1949), *Lost Boundaries* (1949), and *Home of the Brave* (1949) among them—that addressed issues of racism directly. Such an approach was modestly successful but ultimately short-lived. Most of the '40s may be viewed as one of the few progressive periods in Hollywood's representation of African Americans, even if the films were compromised in various ways and the advances largely driven by world events.

This larger wartime struggle for change was complicated by what Cripps, in *Making Movies Black*, has labeled the theory of "thermidor"—the notion that any tentative progress in representation is always offset by a conservative backlash. The term denotes a cooling-off period, which is by default conservative, following a moment of social rupture. This postwar mind-set, argues Cripps, is a "period of adjustment . . . the cooling of ardor that has followed every era of disquiet since from the French Revolution onward, the moment when order seems to matter more than liberty, sameness more than novelty."[17] While also citing economic reasons, the reluctant activism of black actors, and the HUAC situation, Cripps argues that after the war Hollywood went back to making safe films for general audiences that did not challenge cultural norms. The social accomplishments of this period were also complicated, as Cripps notes, by the fact that Hollywood's move toward more inclusive depictions of blacks essentially ended the decades-long alternate trajectory of "race films." Products themselves of segregation, race films were low-budget, independently produced movies (such as those of Oscar Micheaux) that featured, and were marketed explicitly to, African Americans.

The ambivalent implications of thermidor problematize other scholars' historiographic work on the period. Thomas Doherty recently suggested that the war effort to increase cinematic visibility of African Americans resulted in "a portent of progress and the forward marches to come."[18] His book *Projections of War* attempts to both excavate and articulate World War II's depiction in American film during the period

of U.S. involvement in the conflict itself (1941–1945). His argument depends heavily on the assumption that the social progress and cinematic legacy of World War II have since been distorted by the passage of time and by critical arrogance. While the work of the OWI and the NAACP did have a modestly positive effect, this increased visibility created as much a backlash (i.e., thermidor) as it did an improvement. Moreover, the backlash began *during* the war, not after. As *Ebony* magazine reported, as soon as victory overseas seemed certain, Hollywood regressed: "The only significant improvement [in representation] came early in the war when all America was changing its mind" about black people because of the white supremacist rhetoric of the Nazis.[19] As Ray also noted about the period, "the matched conservatism of the period's politics and films suggest, as film historian Eric Rhode observes, that a great deal had been swept under the rug"[20] in the rush to victory.

Such work on World War II and other contemporary representations creates the impression of a *linear* history of forward progress. It neglects to account for the conservative backlash after the war and in the early days of television (which first featured equally regressive stereotypes like *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah*, the happy mammy). Such reactionary texts should instead generate a sense of ambivalence, which ultimately tempers the extent to which cinematic representations are able to affect any kind of true social change. The history of *Song of the South* reminds us of the importance of resisting such linear narratives of film history, and the claims of social progress that often accompany them. Both as an object for reception during the last sixty years, and as a product of the post–World War II United States, meanings attached to Disney's film have been anything but stable. The reception history of *Song of the South* is not one of linear progress (or regression), but rather one of repetition and redundancy, of possible changes for the worse within racial ideologies slowly generated therein. At its very inception, the film's own position within the dynamics of thermidor, as it attempted to offset the modest racial progress of World War II, should remind us of that.

DISNEY'S EARLY MARKETING
OF APOLITICAL POPULISM

Another important historical context for *Song of the South* was Disney's careful negotiations with both the ideology and cultural reception of its own texts. The company's box office successes were often

the result of outside factors, such as the Great Depression. These external influences would eventually work against Disney when *Song of the South* was released. Before *Fantasia* and the studio strike in the early 1940s, Disney had considerable luck with critics and audiences. The success of these early films, especially the Oscar-winning *Three Little Pigs*, provides an alternate trajectory for understanding why *Song of the South* later tried, and at first failed, to re-create a similar connection with audiences. Steven Watts has referred to the 1930s as Disney's "golden age." With Mickey Mouse, the *Silly Symphonies* shorts, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), the company first attained stable financial success and considerable artistic recognition. Watts claims that the company's early success at tapping into a larger cultural and historical zeitgeist was mostly "unintentional."[21] He avoids giving too much authorial agency to Walt Disney himself, as well as credit to the people who worked under him, for anticipating national moods. Similarly, the most recent work on Disney, such as the studies by Douglas Gomery and Janet Wasko, moves away from the "great man" myth—the idea that Disney himself was solely, or even primarily, responsible for both the studio's output and its commercial fortunes.[22]

Less the result of artistic genius, *Three Little Pigs* tapped into preexisting conditions of possibility during the 1930s. A short animated film that became an instant sensation in the United States, *Three Little Pigs* and its hit song, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?," benefited tremendously from the conditions of the Great Depression. Watts notes that everyone from Marxists to cultural elites to psychologists found much to explore in the film's aggressively ambiguous allegory.[23] Many saw in the Three Little Pigs' resistance to the Big Bad Wolf a hopeful message about resiliency, hard work, and solidarity during the Great Depression. Similarly, very different audiences read the film as an allegory of resistance to Fascism's rise in Europe.

The film's ideological success was thus largely derived from external factors. As the public face of the company, Walt and his studio were reluctant to offer political readings of the movie or its equally popular song. He preferred to present publicly a careful naïveté on the subject. Yet Disney eventually embraced a populist message regarding the film that simultaneously denied any explicit politics. Reacting favorably to the political climate would help sell both the product and the "common man" appeal of the Disney brand. Such constructed populism and ambivalence set the stage for the production and reception of *Song of the South* during the subsequent decade. The latter film would attempt

to both deny and activate existing political postwar ideologies, though with a different outcome. Moreover, the failures of *Song of the South* in 1946 would reiterate how Disney's artistic ambitions were dependent on cultural factors beyond its control. Despite its innovations in hybrid animation, the film failed to capture the political climate of the time.

Disney's apolitical facade, so crucial to its success in the 1930s, was always an illusion. The animators' strike in 1941—about which Walt was still upset during the casting of *Song of the South* years later—foregrounded how the carefully apolitical persona that Disney crafted was highly deceptive. First evident in the success of *Three Little Pigs,* Disney's seeming populism was a conservative form of politics that derived its power from pretending to ignore political concerns. His inability to even comprehend the concerns of his striking workers in Burbank revealed a deeply conservative, antiunion impulse that had been there all along. Workers were upset over inconsistent pay, excessive overtime hours, a lack of credit for work performed, and the hoarding of profits made from hits such as *Snow White* and *Dumbo* (1941). Ironically, Walt was able to get away with such exploitation because of the rampant unemployment created during the Great Depression. As the studio achieved greater fortune, Disney did not revise his own bureaucracy accordingly, having grown complacent overseeing a professional milieu in which such working conditions previously went unquestioned. Progressives who were anxious to read positive messages into the studio's films during the 1930s realized after the strike that Disney was hardly concerned with the plight of the average person.

But the economic and ideological realities of the Depression were not the only factors in Disney's early success. The 1930s were the only time in the history of Disney's company when nostalgia did not play a central role in its popularity. Other historical factors besides the fallout from the 1929 Stock Market Crash warrant closer scrutiny. Disney's emergent success can be traced, for instance, to child-rearing studies in behaviorism. Nicholas Sammond's book *Babes in Tomorrowland* explores how Disney constructed its early productions in relation to discourses on the generic (implicitly white, Protestant, and middle-class) concept of the "child." While some early critics of the first motion pictures believed they could have harmful effects on women, children, and immigrants, the child eventually emerged as the one category most in need of protection from the cinema. As Sammond argues, however, the "child" was largely a social construction used to regulate media content and stifle discussion of other social factors, such as race and class. As a result, Disney positioned

its products as correctives to perceived ills, offering films intended to have positive effects on children. This mode of film marketing, meanwhile, spread into advertising campaigns for other company products. Disney did not create the child as a marketing niche—yet, as the reception history of *Song of the South* later reveals, the studio did capitalize on and refine its possibilities through later years.

Sammond rejects any overt suggestion that Disney's accomplishments emerged purely because of creative artistic genius—either his own, or that of the talented animators he employed. *Babes in Tomorrowland* is largely about the construction of the child in popular, as well as specialized and scientific, discourses. Disney, meanwhile, served as only one, albeit crucial, part of the "discursive matrix"[24] surrounding the concept of the child. While he emphasizes that there is no necessary direct or cause-effect correlation between studies of the child and Disney, he does outline preexisting conditions of possibility for Disney's success in the late 1920s and 1930s. "Without the discourse of movie effects in circulation at that moment," writes Sammond, "Disney would not have had recourse to this form of address" to naturalized middle-class virtues of deferred gratification, self-denial, thrift, and perseverance.[25] Sammond defines the company as one among many beneficiaries of earlier attempts by activist groups, popular magazines, and child-rearing manuals to exploit newfound concerns around children. Appeals to the child were, and often still are, deployed by adult defenders of Disney to highlight its perceived innocence.

Disney's products thus were, and are still, targeted toward adults. While its animation may have been geared toward kids, *Song of the South* was reaching for an adult market with its live action melodrama. Originally conceived in the pre–World War II era, *Song of the South* was Disney's cost-efficient exploitation of popular '30s cinematic representations of the Old South, such as Bing Crosby's musicals and *Gone with the Wind*. For nearly three decades, *Gone with the Wind* was by far the biggest Hollywood film. Every film that followed Selznick's epic was conscious of its success. As the film scholar Molly Haskell recently wrote, "Reading the [original Margaret Mitchell] book and seeing the movie [adaptation] were to my generation interchangeable rites of passage as inevitable as baptism, the first communion, the first date, the first kiss."[26] *Gone with the Wind* was not only the highest-grossing film of all time until the release of *The Godfather* (1972);[27] it had also still grossed, as late as the mid-1950s, nearly *twice* as much as the next highest-grossing film of all time, *The Robe* (1953).[28] *Song of the South* was, in a sense, Disney's

own adaptation of *Gone with the Wind*, which included casting Hattie McDaniel in a similar role of the maid. "It becomes immediately obvious," Susan Miller and Greg Rode sarcastically wrote years later, "that Hattie McDaniel . . . has merely lingered at the set for Tara, awaiting another domestically disarranged family." [29] *Song of the South* offered a mixture of the Selznick film's romance and nostalgia for the imagined Old South with Disney's distinctive brand of catchy musical tunes and groundbreaking animation. Not coincidentally, 1939 was also the year that Disney began negotiating the rights to the Harris stories. [30] Disney had planned to make the film then, possibly even with Paul Robeson as Uncle Remus, [31] but delayed it upon the outbreak of war. This very same war financially saved the company, but it also eventually made the final product that was *Song of the South* even more outdated.

THE DISNEY STUDIOS' FINANCIAL STRUGGLES

By the 1940s, Disney was heavily dependent on the use of live action to cut costs. Even before World War II, it was clear that animation was not only expensive, but also failed to consistently draw large audiences. For every *Snow White*, there was also a *Fantasia* or *Pinocchio*—films that failed on first release to recoup their costs at the box office. Live action was one way to both minimize such financial risks and produce new films more quickly. The results were films that ranged from self-promotional features like *The Reluctant Dragon* (1941) to documentaries such as *Seal Island* (1948), which were all more live action than animation. This trend essentially continued until the day Walt died three decades later. Largely live action entertainment such as the *Disneyland* TV show or the film *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954) were as big as any cartoons made during this time. Although it had made the company's reputation, new animated features were very much an afterthought by the time Disney expanded its media offerings in the 1950s and 1960s.

In particular, Disney had refined its familiarity with the use of live action through a variety of World War II propaganda texts, such as *Victory Through Air Power* and the Latin America "Good Neighbor" projects, *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros* (1945). The war shifted priorities for Disney, since government contracts kept the company afloat. The U.S. government constituted the bulk of Disney's funding, rescuing

the company from considerable creative and financial trouble, often of its own making (e.g., *Fantasia*,[32] the strike). During the war, Disney produced everything from domestic propaganda (*Der Fuehrer's Face*, 1943) to government instructional films. These pro-war and goodwill efforts also solidified Disney's reputation internationally as a face of the United States. *Saludos Amigos* was intended to strengthen the United States' image in South America more than it was designed to bring in revenue domestically. This also gave the company's public persona a more nationalistic connotation on the eve of *Song of the South*, which was its first major project after World War II not tied to the war effort. While the company was afforded creative freedom after the war to pursue its own projects, the government no longer guaranteed these films' financial bottom line.

At the same time, Disney's struggles were symptomatic of larger industry woes. Hollywood had been in an economic downturn since the late 1930s—something that war-related film production only postponed. After World War II, meanwhile, "the postwar era soon proved to be the most turbulent and crisis-ridden period in industry history."[33] Every Hollywood studio was battling additional union strikes, tightened foreign markets, antitrust lawsuits, and a suburban exodus that caused revenue from downtown theaters to dwindle. Disney was representative, but hardly unique in its postwar struggles. As Christopher Anderson writes, "Disney nearly buried his studio beneath ambitious plans for expansion. With box office disappointments like the costly animated feature *Fantasia* (1940), the closing of foreign markets because of the war, and overinvestment in new studio facilities, Disney faced burdensome corporate debts that weighed even more heavily once the banks shut off credit to the studio."[34]

As a result, *Song of the South* came out at a notoriously lean financial, if also innovative, time for the studio. In July 1946, four months before the film's premiere, production was halted on all feature-length productions, except for the four that were already well underway or nearing completion—*Song of the South*, *Make Mine Music* (1946), *Fun and Fancy Free* (1947), and *So Dear to My Heart* (1948).[35] Also during that summer, the Disney Studios cut 40 percent of its workforce, "because of economic conditions reflecting increased wage demands by union crafts, as well as other inflated costs."[36] Disney's reluctance to deal with his recently unionized animators was another reason that live action looked more appealing. Less than a month later, the *New York Times* reported that, after much haggling, Disney eventually reached a com-

promise with the Screen Cartoonists Guild to hire back 108 artists, with the sole purpose of completing *Song of the South* and *Fun and Fancy Free*. All other projects were shelved indefinitely.[37] According to articles in both *Variety* and the *New York Times*, Disney was losing considerable money on investments in those films that had yet to see theatrical distribution—all feature-length works that employed both animation and live action.

Such conditions made *Song of the South*'s success all the more crucial. At the time of the premiere, Disney spent considerable money advertising *Song of the South* in *Variety*. This included lavish full-page ads describing promotional strategies for its November 12 debut in Atlanta. Ironically, the trade paper also reported in the very same issue that the studio was in financial trouble and considering "whether it will continue producing the shorts."[38] That same article noted that "a great deal is expected of '*Song of the South*.'"[39] A month and a half later, the *New York Times* reported that Disney earned a profit of only $199,602 in 1946 because of production costs related to unreleased films. Because so many forthcoming films were now in the distribution pipeline, however, Roy O. Disney reportedly believed that "the years ahead will be the most successful in the company's history."[40] This prediction ultimately proved true by the mid-to-late 1950s, but was certainly not the case in the late 1940s.

PRODUCTION, TEXTUALITY, AND INCOHERENCE

The conditions for *Song of the South*'s contradictory reception history began with the film itself. According to Neal Gabler, the Disney Studios were well aware of potential controversies around *Song of the South*, even during preproduction. Publicist Vern Caldwell was quoted as saying that "the negro situation is a dangerous one. . . . Between the negro haters and the negro lovers there are many chances to run afoul of situations that could run the gamut."[41] The awareness of multiple audiences here reinforced the idea that, from its inception, there was always a certain incoherent mentality attached to the film. Disney wasn't really sure whom to reach with *Song of the South* or how to reach them. Originally written by a conservative Southerner, Dalton Reymond, the script was later rewritten by an East Coast liberal, Maurice Rapf. In this regard, the script itself reflected a split personality. "One of the reasons

Walt had hired Rapf to work with Reymond," writes Gabler, "was to temper what he feared would be Reymond's white southern slant. Rapf was a minority, a Jew, and an outspoken left-winger, and he himself feared that the film would inevitably be Uncle Tomish. 'That's exactly why I want you to work on it,' Walt told him, 'because I know that you don't think I should make the movie. You're against Uncle Tomism, and you're a radical.'"[42] Gabler believes that Rapf gave the film a more liberal sensibility. In contrast, Cripps argues that Rapf's hiring was an implicit admission by someone within Disney that the original draft was too conservative. But he views the liberal's role in the film's preproduction as more a matter of what could have been, rather than something reflected in the final product. In either case, the divergent presence of both Rapf and Reymond, in addition to the input of Walt, Caldwell, and others, explicitly symbolized some sense of the film's ideological ambiguity.

Such incoherence was also echoed in the hybrid use of live action footage and animation. The lighthearted, whimsical cartoons clash jarringly with the live action melodrama that depicts broken families, racial inequality, and children near death. The affective charge of carefree musical sequences runs counter to the (largely subtextual) harshness of plantation life. These differences were intensified by the fact that each section had a different director—Wilfred Jackson (animation), who had worked on *The Three Caballeros*, and Perce Pearce (live action). Neither of them, meanwhile, had much contact with each other during production. Moreover, the work on the animation itself was fractured. As Michael Barrier noted, several different Disney animators worked separately on drawing and animating the exact same characters.[43] To that extent, Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox were literally incoherent.

The use of live action with animation created as many problems for the storytelling as it did opportunities. For decades prior to *Song of the South* and other hybrid films, Disney's animation depicted an artificial world with no indexical relation to a photographically real world. This allowed the studio to successfully promote the cartoons as "timeless," tapping into universal truths. Animated cartoons play a central part in what James Snead would later identify as Disney's "rhetoric of *harmlessness*,"[44] that they were "only" children's stories set in fantastical, unrealistic environments. Yet the move toward integrating live action footage, while cheaper, was costly in a different sense. Shifting away from animation, from hand-drawn furry creatures to flesh-and-blood actors, the socially constructed "timelessness" of Disney's characters and worlds became tenuous. As with the racial and sexual controversies surround-

ing *Saludos Amigos*, *Song of the South*'s hybrid animation drew out this glaring disconnect. The presence of "real" people such as Uncle Remus and other human characters within a sentimental melodrama—which Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* called the "work of conventional [Hollywood] hacks"[45]—scarred the facade of Disney's perceived universal appeal.

The movie's setting is similarly incoherent. It is a supposedly post-Reconstruction story set within a seemingly pre–Civil War South. The lack of a clear historical context reiterates how the film could be read either way. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Walter White of the NAACP famously said that *Song of the South* gives "the impression of an idyllic master–slave relationship."[46] Defenders of the film are quick to respond that it does not take place during the era of slavery, but rather after the Civil War. This is true to a point: Uncle Remus is not technically a slave. But he's not exactly "free" either. While there is no explicit reference to slavery, the narrative offers no clues that would suggest anything *other* than the imaginary space of an idyllic Southern plantation, thereby reinforcing White's criticism of the film. Precisely because it is so historically and thematically vague, *Song of the South* does give the *impression* of a master–slave relationship, even if it's not literally a story about slaves.

Thus, for all its narrative elusiveness, *Song of the South* is marred by a fundamentally regressive sense of race relations in the United States. The anecdote of Walt's talk with Rapf does not support the idea that Disney was particularly sensitive to the delicate issue of representing African Americans. Gabler claims, though, that Disney never "made disparaging remarks about blacks or asserted white superiority"—a claim not even supported by Gabler's own research.[47] Not only is *Song of the South* a movie derogatory because of its "Uncle Tomism," it was made by people who were well aware of the stereotype, who knew others would be offended, and who clearly felt that there was nothing wrong with that. However tempting it may be to see Johnny and Uncle Remus's relationship as warm and positive, it cannot be overstated just how problematic some white attitudes toward African Americans were at the time *Song of the South* was made. According to the reporter Hilda See in 1954, it was "a matter of printed record but that for the insistence of Walt Disney James Baskett would not have been cast as 'Uncle Remus' in 'Song of the South.' It is well known that some of his official advisors were against having a Negro in the part. However Disney is said to have held out to the end."[48] It is not impossible that a role in a major Hollywood film in

the post–World War II era could have been played unironically in black-face (especially when radio's *Amos 'n' Andy* protagonists were still being voiced by white men). As we have seen, the advances in racial representation achieved during World War II did not necessarily extend beyond wartime. And, as the next chapter shows, neither white nor black communities had consistent attitudes toward *Song of the South*, resulting in a convoluted environment out of and into which the film emerged.

People resisted the project even before it hit theaters. The studio did send the script out to African American activist groups for critique, but only after controversy had begun to develop.[49] But it is unclear if the studio paid any attention to the feedback it received. Walt himself did not believe that the project offended African Americans. Instead, he was convinced that any controversy was the result of Communist agitation, which he had resented since the 1941 strike. He also believed it was the bitter retribution of the actor/writer Clarence Muse, whom Disney claimed was retaliating for not being offered the Uncle Remus part.[50] Muse had earlier been affiliated with more progressive, if still problematic, films about race, appearing in *So Red the Rose* (1934) and cowriting *Way Down South* (1939). Disney may have rejected Muse (along with Robeson) for that reason.

AFFECTIVE FRAGMENTS

Despite its historical place as a thermidorian post–World War II film, then, the production of *Song of the South* was fundamentally incoherent, resulting in the inherent *potential* to affect conflicting responses. Richard Dyer's work is instructive here, especially his discussion of the "nonrepresentational" signs in classical Hollywood cinema—particularly in musicals. These films concealed and complicated the reception of default conservative ideological assumptions about race, class, and gender through such cinematic devices as music, movement, and color. While denying the presence of real conflict, Dyer argues, musicals work to accommodate audiences' desire for a more utopian arrangement of life's cultural and economic struggles. This "utopian sensibility," he writes, "has to take off from the real experiences of the audiences."[51] The sets, colors, and sounds for audiences did not undermine the authentic feelings of reassurance that such artificiality often generated. The surreality and absurdity of what they saw on the screen, in other words, does not reflect the real emotions of escape and hope they may *feel*. More-

over, such affective power—through nonrepresentational signs unlinked to the image itself—can run counter to the film's overt narrative.

Song of the South's "utopian sensibility" works in similarly complicated ways. Focusing on affect, Catherine Gunther Kodat recently argued that *Song of the South*'s popularity cannot be explained only by its activation of existing racist attitudes in white audiences. She uses contemporary events in the late 1940s—such as President Truman's biracial committee on civil rights (1946), Jackie Robinson's major league baseball debut (1947), and the desegregation of the military (1948)—to suggest that *Song of the South* did not have a negative impact on race relations when it was first released. She argues instead that, while deeply racist itself, the film could operate as "a vague and flickering precursor of a shift in the racial attitudes of white Americans over the course of the Cold War years, a shift that led large numbers of white Americans to make common cause with African Americans in the fight to end racial injustice."[52] She focuses on the affective cultural work that *Song of the South* performed on white audiences, making them *feel* good about race relations (while acknowledging how African Americans did not necessarily feel the same way). Dyer and Kodat's respective work highlights how audiences do not necessarily respond to, or identify directly with, surrealistic musical spaces or ideological indoctrination. They often connect with a film's affect, which itself becomes increasingly complicated as nostalgia develops over subsequent decades.

Through the ambiguity of reconciliatory myths, *Song of the South* contains enough thematic and ideological uncertainty to lend itself to progressive (albeit misguided) readings. This is especially acute when questions of affect and memory are raised. Audiences do not necessarily think in terms of contexts and narrative structures, but often in fragments. In *The Remembered Film*, Victor Burgin discusses how audiences recall less and less of a film's narrative as time passes from the initial viewing. "The more the film is distanced in memory, the more the binding effect of the narrative is loosened," he writes. "The sequence breaks apart. The fragments go adrift and enter into new combinations, more or less transitory."[53] Even right after a first viewing, memories of a film are focused more on excerpts and particular moments than on the cohesive whole. For instance, just because the narrative of *Song of the South* supports racist attitudes doesn't prevent audiences from remembering—or picking out—fragments that might have a separate meaning. Johnny's deeply affective one-on-one bond with Uncle Remus reduces the film's racial relations to a personal melodrama. It is also one example of a frag-

Johnny's parents (Ruth Warrick and Erik Rolf) are headed for a separation, as his father prepares to return to Atlanta. Fans and critics of the film often debate his vague role as a possible liberal activist.

ment that comes to stand in for the whole. The music's powerful affect—emphasizing "wonderful days" and "laughing places"—also suggests how audiences may respond more to isolated parts. Certainly the radio and record recirculation of this music assists the process of fragmentation.

Another important, and ambiguous, narrative development in *Song of the South* is the role of Johnny's father, who leaves early in the film. This activates a discourse of divorce from the child's point of view. Uncle Remus essentially replaces the father's role until he returns. Some fans recently read the father's absence as an inherently *progressive* aspect of the film. For example, the author and journalist Bill Vaughn wrote that "since the movie was set during Reconstruction it can be assumed that John Sr. was enraging reactionary Georgians by taking the forward-thinking position on rebuilding Dixie's economy. (His character was probably based on the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, Henry Grady, who advocated a 'New South' with big Yankee-like cities and factories replacing the plantation system.)"[54]

Johnny's father, by this reading, is a liberal activist who goes to Atlanta in the beginning of the film because he is a champion of African American rights. This reading is reinforced by the fact that the father in the film is supposedly the child from the original literary stories. It would

stand to reason that the father might grow up to be sympathetic to African American causes. Yet to argue as much with any degree of certainty is problematic. Any such explicit narrative developments on that note are missing from the story. *Song of the South* itself does not offer such a "forward-thinking position" regarding the roles of African Americans in the economy. In the meantime, *Song of the South* confines the film's most prominent African American, Uncle Remus, to a cabin behind the mansion. Almost every other African American is working happily either in the kitchen or out in the cotton fields—not exactly a progressive representation. I mean less to discount readings such as Vaughn's than to suggest that such progressive interpretations of *Song of the South* are, at best, arbitrary. They are founded on selected fragments, utopian affective potential, and the film's fundamental narrative ambiguity.

AGGRESSIVE AMBIGUITY

Although destined to offend many, and ultimately disappointing at the box office, *Song of the South* was hardly a bad *business* idea. Not only was the mixed-genre style more cost-efficient to produce, but feature-length films generated greater revenue than did animated shorts.[55] This encouraged the studio to find creative ways to effectively funnel short subject cartoons into feature-length formats. Moreover, Walt himself could (as with the construction of Disneyland the following decade) reach into his own nostalgia for the Uncle Remus stories he had heard as a child. This would potentially explain why Johnny is so prominent and sympathetic a character, especially compared to the white adults. In theory, *Song of the South* could save on production costs, tap into the market created by *Gone with the Wind*'s success and by the cultural mood of thermidor, and create new types of family-friendly products for the company to promote. Yet what might get lost today, bracketing the racial implications of the film, was that such a low-cost aesthetic union between populist cinematic melodrama of the time and Disney's own existing family brand created a formally and thematically uneven film.

Understanding the reception history of *Song of the South* begins with the economic, cultural, and textual awareness that the film itself is in many ways *aggressively ambiguous*. It is *not* innocent or inoffensive, but gives audiences so inclined just enough information to believe that it can be read sympathetically. Yet all these factors would shift and com-

plicate in the coming years as the film developed a greater illusion of cohesiveness through recirculation and nostalgia. Despite its own textual incoherence, the long-term reception of *Song of the South* is centered first and foremost on—as Ray said of the classical Hollywood style—"the repetitive elaborations that it required to become convincing." Many audiences in the 1970s, 1980s, and even today still do not see the problems of racial representation that were obvious to so many in the 1940s, white and black. Continual theatrical reissue and transmedia repurposing eventually made the incoherent *Song of the South* "convincing" as a representation of race relations. Thermidor was of a different time. It is no longer a condition of possibility when looking at *Song of the South* today, other than for the historian trying to excavate the past.

Two   "PUT DOWN THE MINT JULEP,
         MR. DISNEY"

*Postwar Racial Consciousness and Disney's Critical
Legacy in the 1946 Reception of* Song of the South

> *The picture, "Song of the South," appears to give
> different people extremely different impressions.*
> R. E. BOWLES, LETTER TO EDITOR,
> *WASHINGTON POST,* DECEMBER 31, 1946

R. E. Bowles noted in a 1946 letter to the *Post* that *Song of the South*'s debut was generating heated responses in the pages of numerous newspapers. Despite the film's own claims to "simple truths," *Song of the South,* he or she wrote, was generating a wide range of critical reactions to its theatrical debut. As one of the earliest known audience responses to *Song of the South*, Bowles could not have imagined just how prescient this observation would ultimately prove. Disagreements over the film had only just begun. Yet, in one respect, Bowles's observation was not quite accurate: the response to *Song of the South* then was primarily *negative*. While some people were less critical than were others, few were unconditionally positive. One such person was Bowles, whose enthusiastic interpretation of *Song of the South* attempted to create a space for contrarian opinions. Over subsequent decades, responses to the film would become much more complicated. Increasing nostalgic affective attachments, migration into other media formats, and changing historical contexts would further muddle its politics. Both critical perceptions and textual versions of *Song of the South* would later change. But none of this was an issue in 1946.

The film premiered at the Fox Theatre in downtown Atlanta on November 12. It was a large, three-day affair, with more than two dozen Southern reporters invited to cover the event. Walt himself had left for Atlanta several days early to attend. The day before *Song of the South*'s theatrical debut, the city was treated to a large parade, featuring giant floats of various Disney characters.[1] The night of the film's premiere,

Disney was interviewed on the *Vox Pop* radio program from the Fox Theatre, along with Georgia Governor Ellis Arnall, Atlanta Mayor William B. Hartsfield, descendants of Joel Chandler Harris, and the film star Gene Tierney (who did not appear in the film).[2] Also on hand were stars Ruth Warrick, Bobby Driscoll, and Luana Patten, along with actors and actresses who provided the voices of Donald Duck (Clarence Nash), Snow White (Adriana Caselotti), Pluto/Goofy (Pinto Colvig), and Jiminy Cricket (Cliff Edwards). As was eventually noted by many, Georgia's enforced segregation prevented *Song of the South*'s two African American stars, Baskett and McDaniel, from attending the festivities—something that even few Northern newspapers at the time made a point to mention.[3]

Song of the South's eventual underperformance at the box office was not for lack of promotion. According to a studio advertisement at the time, *Song of the South* was sold throughout the country in "four-color ads in 75 of the biggest Sunday newspaper magazines and supplements in the country . . . saturating America with one of the most comprehensive campaigns on record! . . . including the most intensive and widespread music promotion ever devised."[4] This campaign did not necessarily help *Song of the South*'s ultimate box office performance, but the music promotion paid off. According to *Variety*, "Sooner or Later" and "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" had already cracked the list of "Top 30" radio songs during the week of November 8–14[5]—just before the film was released. It is an oddly appropriate historical irony that "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" technically debuted and found immediate success even before the theatrical release of *Song of the South*, since today the song is still remembered and referenced more so than the film that featured it.

Unlike its soundtrack, however, *Song of the South* generated harsh critical reviews, offended many audiences, and garnered underwhelming box office returns. Despite later assumptions to the contrary, *Song of the South* was a commercial disappointment. In addition to the above promotional costs, the final production tab on the film itself ran over $2 million.[6] The film essentially broke even when it later grossed $3.4 million.[7] This was not a fiasco by any measure, but it was almost $2 million less than even Walt Disney had privately hoped.[8] In any case, it was certainly not enough to reenergize the studio, or to pull it out of the deep financial trouble it had dealt with throughout the 1940s. Moreover, final numbers were especially underwhelming given the various factors that appeared in *Song of the South*'s favor—Disney's promotional efforts, the popularity of the film's songs on the radio, the appeal of Disney's brand name, and,

most important, the built-in literary audience represented by generations of Harris readers. By opening first in the South, and then later distributing it to the East and West Coasts—its own "Southern strategy"—Disney anticipated that favorable Southern press would send *Song of the South* off on a path to huge box office success.[9]

As it was rolled out much more slowly than films are today, however, the word of mouth certainly could not have helped: the film suffered widespread critical abuse for its aesthetics and politics. Even before the film was released, the *Chicago Defender* (a prominent African American publication) reported that *Song of the South* came under "considerable panning from the press when producer Walt Disney first announced his intention to film the whimsical story."[10] That same *Defender* article also referred to the film as *Uncle Remus* before noting that the title was changed "following a Gallup Poll for a suitable title for the film."[11] This change from *Uncle Remus* to *Song of the South* was in part to avoid overt "Uncle Tom" connotations. But it also upset the Harris family and may have also alienated (or confused) his literary followers. There were many reasons why the film underperformed beyond the bad publicity that its Uncle Tom representations generated. But the negative word of mouth also tempered any excitement or anticipation the release might have elicited.

In the most recent scholarly account of *Song of the South*'s first reception in the 1940s, Douglas Brode in *Multiculturalism and the Mouse* argues that criticism of the film then was largely limited to white reviewers who were "overeager to display their newly acquired heightened awareness" of racial offenses.[12] Moreover, the book suggests that *Song of the South* was progressive for its time because Uncle Remus was a subversion of the Uncle Tom stereotype, at a time when audiences would not have otherwise accepted such a strong black lead character. "Over the next half-century," writes Brode, "African American film historians would insist on the need for 'black roles that challenged the stereotypes that had been the icons of earlier times' [citing Thomas Cripps]. Achieving this necessitates purposefully evoking, then reevaluating the cliché. Disney's approach ought to be analyzed and understood in terms of the time in which his movie was made. The filmmaker sensed that to utterly abandon the Tom and Mammy icons would disorient a mainstream audience in 1946."[13] In fact, historical evidence in the following pages will reveal quite the opposite. Audiences were more conscious of the "cliché" than was Disney. After World War II many rejected the stereotypes for what they were—outdated, clichéd, and degrading images that presented

a whole race of people in a negative light. On the subject of war, the most crucial historical event informing *Song of the South*'s first reception, Brode argues only that Disney's film was one of the first major studio projects to heed the NAACP and Urban League's respective calls for "a new [black] screen image" on the heels of African American contributions to the war effort. But *Song of the South* did not fulfill the NAACP's desire for a more "positive" representation. In fact, the activist organization specifically cited the film as a step back in cinematic race relations.

While whites undoubtedly contributed a considerable portion of the criticism, it is presumptuous to assume that they would have all identified themselves as "liberal." Moreover, the film was harshly criticized in black periodicals as well. One *Defender* article insisted that "critics of both races claim the tale-teller story based on the writings of Joel Chandler Harris glorifies slavery and holds the Negro up for ridicule."[14] The newspaper also noted a month after the film's premiere, with only a little overstatement, that *Song of the South* "caused Harlem and Chicago's Southside to scream 'terrible.'"[15] But we should be also mindful of the conflicted attitudes toward *Song of the South* even within African American communities. Matthew Bernstein, for instance, has argued that a local Atlanta black newspaper, the *Daily World*, "was highly ambivalent. It displayed neither the unabashed enthusiasm of the white papers for the film as in one Atlantan's phrase, 'waking a nostalgia for a gentle way of life lost in the rush of years,' nor the critical tone of black civil leaders and of the liberal white and Northern newspapers."[16] Ambivalence in the South was due less to racial harmony between whites and blacks than to particular contexts. Both responses in Atlanta "were shaped by several factors, such as the element of hometown pride in Harris' achievement, the shared heritage of the tales themselves, and by what was viewed as appealing aspects of the film."[17] Not all African Americans criticized the film, even in the North. Yet such responses were still, on balance, distinctly negative.

It is important to start with an accurate historical account of what people said and why when *Song of the South* first was released in 1946. There are at least three common historical misperceptions underlining Brode's argument: one, that only white liberals criticized the film; two, that its representation of race relations was at the very least typical of the time and, at best, even modestly progressive; and, finally, that the activism of World War II did not significantly change how audiences read these stereotypes after the war. As I show in later chapters, these inaccuracies migrate increasingly from the realm of popular conserva-

tive myth to "historical truth" for newer audiences trying to understand
the film. This chapter takes as one of its central functions the need to
articulate what people really said about *Song of the South* when it was
first released, even if those conditions have shifted in countless ways in
the nearly seventy years since.

Responses to *Song of the South* were not universally bad, but audi-
ences then were more critical and better informed than has been prop-
erly acknowledged. As Janet Staiger, Richard Dyer, and others have
shown, movie audiences long before the 1940s negotiated images of Af-
rican Americans in Hollywood cinema with complexity, contradiction,
and a practical understanding of history. Staiger's work on the reception
of D. W. Griffith's racist *Birth of a Nation* (1915), for example, shows how
audiences then saw the film as offensive even in its own time, through
a variety of historical factors that informed and complicated these diver-
gent responses. "Any individual (then or now)," she writes, "might have
conflicting or overdetermined views about *Birth of a Nation* depending
on that person's attitudes toward and judgments of its representation, its
technical presentation, and censorship."[18]

In many ways, the complexity of both supportive and resistant *Song
of the South* readings echo what Staiger uncovered in her work on *Birth
of a Nation*'s reception. Liberal critics of *Birth of the Nation* when it
was first released would often resist calls to ban the film based on larger
moral objections to censorship. Meanwhile, Marxist attacks on the film
in the 1930s had more to do with its perpetuation of a capitalist work
ethic than with its racism. Proponents of the film then might be more
likely to champion the film's technological innovation than to defend its
presentation of history. Staiger acknowledges too that notions of conser-
vative and progressive audiences are historically problematic categories
themselves, given how connotations shift from decade to decade. But
they were quite conscious of the offensive black stereotypes (the "brute,"
the "coon," the "Tom," and so forth) in *Birth of the Nation* in the early
twentieth century—long before *Song of the South* ever hit the big screen.
She notes that as early as 1906, "few individuals encouraged representing
blacks as beasts"[19]—the most egregious, but far from the only, offensive
stereotype later perpetuated by Griffith's film.

The historical contexts established in the previous chapter play a
central role in informing initial reactions to *Song of the South*. Looking
at newspapers and magazines from the 1940s reveals that the primary
reading formation at work in *Song of the South*'s first release was not
progress, but rather a retreat from the social advances of World War II.

During the conflict, the federal government worked to promote positive, non-stereotypical images (e.g., *Bataan*, 1943; *Negro Soldier*, 1944; *Henry Browne, Farmer*, 1942) to help boost African American morale as part of the war effort. *Song of the South* undermined this cause in 1946. There were also other contexts at work in the film's reception, some of which were outlined in the previous chapter—Disney's artistic reputation, political activism by various associations and unions, and an awareness of the damaging legacy of literary and cinematic African American representations up to that point. All of these influences played a part in *Song of the South*'s often-hostile greeting. At its core, though, post–World War II racial consciousness framed much of the resistant reception to the film. This heightened activism was seen in the work of African American newspapers (like the *Chicago Defender*), the NAACP, members of Congress, and progressive teachers unions. This cultural perception, too, intermingled with the film's artistic rejection by others. Film critics such as Bosley Crowther were equally critical, though it was more often because of their disappointment with the film's aesthetics than with its racial politics. Having developed a great fondness for what they saw as Disney's innovative artistic achievements in the 1930s, critics found *Song of the South* uninspired and generally beneath the company's high standards. In the end, the most supportive voices were often studio industry ones, like *Variety* and the gossip columnist Louella Parsons.

A final note about methodology: much of my research here privileges the historical writings and quotations of newspaper critics and political activists whose positions of power granted them the greatest media visibility at the time. This then risks unconsciously repeating a sense of cultural elitism that their opinions may betray, since focusing on people who can speak invariably risks marginalizing those who cannot. This is largely the result of a basic scholarly limitation—what remains in printed form from the 1940s constitutes much of what we can know about what audiences at the time really said. As the range of opinions in the entire book suggests, I do not intend to create the impression that these people speak for everyone who may have seen *Song of the South* upon its initial release in 1946. Their reaction overall, however, does provide a consistent framework for reading the dominant critical climate in which Disney's film first appeared. Moreover, the generally negative reactions of these writers are supported by many of the letters written to newspaper editors by private individuals. There was no reactive outpouring of objection then, as there would be in the 1980s, to criticism of *Song of the South* in the press. Finally, this critical consensus is further corroborated by the

film's mostly disappointing box office performance and by Disney's subsequent ambivalence toward it over the next twenty-plus years. All this clearly demonstrates that there was really no widespread love for *Song of the South* in 1946. In light of this evidence, its eventual success becomes all the more fascinating, and troubling.

POST–WORLD WAR II ACTIVISM

Just as some inside the Disney Studios had feared, several resistant groups awaited *Song of the South*'s arrival. In *Making Movies Black*, Thomas Cripps describes the concerted effort to boycott the film, which was planned long before the movie hit theaters. African American and other progressive advocacy groups targeted *Song of the South* as the test case for the new power they hoped to exercise over the representations of African Americans in the cinema. Groups focused on this movie not only because of its regressive plantation narrative, but also because, as a Disney film, it would be a high-profile production. But the movement was largely undermined by the film's lack of box office success, and because many "were demoralized by the general sweetness" of the picture.[20] African Americans had a conflicted, begrudging respect for Baskett, who had admirably performed the tightrope act of, as the activist Bernard Wolfe called it three years later, "the mediating smile of [Uncle] Remus."[21] Baskett was in a difficult position as one of the first African American leads in a major Hollywood production, cast in a role characterized by degrading stereotype. The actor, wrote Cripps, "managed to give black viewers a tolerable dignity while playing to whites with a reading so densely packed with ancient props and manners that he transported them into a rose-colored past."[22] The deep affection between Uncle Remus and the children, along with the catchy music and colorful animation, complicated matters further. Cripps reflected on the film with a deliberately sarcastic rhetorical question: "How could *anyone*, black or white, resent this happy tale?"[23] While few if any progressive viewers liked the film, *Song of the South* ultimately proved a slippery target.

Some protests even called for censorship. In December 1946, U.S. Representative Adam Clayton Powell Jr. demanded that the New York police stop the screening of both *Song of the South* and *Abie's Irish Rose* (1946), which he said were "an insult to American minorities."[24] The attempt to ban the film came on the heels of the influential radio per-

sonality Jimmy Fiddler's similar criticism. Fiddler released a statement in early January that insisted *Song of the South* "should immediately be withdrawn and the entire Hollywood industry share the cost because it will mean a black eye for all the industry."[25] Elected only two years earlier, Powell was the first black congressman from New York State, representing a segment of New York City that included much of Harlem. Powell introduced failed legislation to prohibit the motion picture industry from using derogatory representations of race, creed, and religion.[26] While he later played a significant role in the passing of Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" civil rights legislation, his largely symbolic attempts at boycotting films such as *Song of the South* did not have much of an effect. In New York City, the film continued to play several weeks at the Palace, despite protests outside.[27] The six theaters in Chicago that catered to African American audiences, meanwhile, refused to screen the film, despite the fact that *Song of the South* still appeared in white theaters in the city.[28]

Criticism during this time, though, was not restricted to African Americans. Mainstream, white audiences identified *Song of the South* as an overtly racist film. For example, someone writing under the pseudonym "White Veteran" argued in a letter to the *Washington Post* that *Song of the South* was a dangerous depiction of African Americans. Although not singling out anyone in particular, the writer stated that:

> readers and letter writers who fail to see any evil in such productions as "Song of the South" or "Gone with the Wind," represent that Janus-faced segment of our population. . . . These people appear innocent enough on the surface, but scratch them and you find shallow hypocrites who believe in democracy provided that benefits extend only to certain citizens, preferably white, Protestant and Anglo-Saxon.
>
> It might be argued that the above films are historical, but it is possible to distort history to the extent that the baser emotions of ignorant people are appealed to and historical truths are buried under an avalanche of lies and reactionary propaganda.[29]

One cannot know for sure whether the person writing really was either "white" or a "veteran." Nevertheless, evoking such an identity demonstrates a particular discourse of the period that marks *Song of the South* as both racial and post–World War II. It also reinforces the idea

that identity politics were always deeply involved in responses to the film. The writer may have assumed that black audiences would be expected to criticize the film, since it *was* a reactionary depiction of race relations in the wake of the war. But a white veteran might gain greater credibility with predominantly white readers. The anonymous writer might have been an African American activist, or a nonveteran, hoping such guises would increase the likelihood of publication and thoughtful readership. The latter options seem unlikely, but they raise the issue that identity play is not limited solely to the age of new media and the Internet, the current historical moment where such discursive masks may only *seem* more likely.

The most famous activist criticism was Walter White's response, representing the NAACP. He was quoted as denouncing *Song of the South* for "helping to perpetuate 'the impression of an idyllic presentation of a master–slave relationship' in the South."[30] This single phrase—that the film represented "an idyllic presentation of a master–slave relationship"— is the one most often repeated as representative of the critical responses at the time. The larger statement, which White sent out in a telegram to several news outlets, read, in part, "In an effort neither to offend audiences in the North or South, the production helps to perpetuate a dangerously glorified picture of slavery. Making use of the beautiful Uncle Remus folklore, '*Song of the South*' gives the impression of an idyllic master–slave relationship which is a distortion of the facts."[31] Many fans and other defenders of Disney responded to White's statement by arguing that the film is not a depiction of slavery. Still others have attempted to argue that slavery was a historical reality and that *Song of the South* cannot be criticized for depicting this fact. Yet, as I noted in the previous chapter, such rebuttals miss the point. What matters in *Song of the South* is the impression generated by the film. The film taps into an imaginary space of the "Old South," as Disney himself put it in 1946,[32] which would seem to evoke generic, but distinctly pre–Civil War, historical conditions. While Remus is free to leave in the narrative, he does so only after being banished by the white mother. The plantation itself—stocked with black workers and free of the ravages of time and war—looks nothing like the postwar South depicted in the second half of *Gone with the Wind*. Most important is that the discussion of the film's historical setting or accuracy avoids the crux of White's concern about the film's depiction of race relations more generally. As he wrote, *Song of the South* gives the impression of an idyllic, white-centric, master–slave hierarchy, especially since there's no clear indication of when it's really set.

Less than two weeks after *Song of the South* opened, a front-page *Variety* article announced that the NAACP planned to open a Hollywood bureau in the near future. The goal would be to "wean producers away from its concept of the Negro as 'scared of ghosts, addicted to tap dancing, banjo plucking and the purloining of Massa's Gin.'" [33] The same article reported that the role of Walter White and the NAACP would be largely advisory, consulting with studios during preproduction to induce Hollywood producers to "treat the Negro in a fair and sensible way . . . [by promising that the] NAACP would cite filmmakers who handle the subject properly in its bulletin which the 565,000 members receive monthly." [34] As *Ebony* noted less than three months later, however, "the NAACP bureau died a-borning," [35] because of conservative trends in the postwar climate and apathy among black performers within the industry who were hesitant about the fallout from such activism.

With the failure of the Hollywood bureau, a more aggressive measure was suggested—a "Negro Legion of Decency." According to *Ebony* in February 1947, this was to be modeled after the "Catholic Legion of Decency," a censorship organization that worked through the 1930s and 1940s to regulate violent and sexual material in Hollywood films. The call for a new activist organization was specifically provoked by the appearance of *Song of the South*, which the magazine labeled African Americans' "worst black eye in the opinion of white Americans." The Disney film was "the worst bender to date," referring to Hollywood's tendency after the war to fall off the metaphorical "wagon [of positive images] and [go] on an anti-Negro binge again." [36] The ultimately unrealized organization could have won "the respect and admiration rather than contempt and derision for the Negro when he appears on the screen." [37] Despite the harshness of the usually tepid *Ebony*'s call to action, it generally epitomized the failure of various activist groups to make anything substantive of *Song of the South*'s controversial appearance. This was also partly due to how quickly the film then disappeared from theaters.

While today the NAACP's critical responses are the most often quoted from the period, it was far from the only progressive activist group to criticize the film. One union—the American Federation of Teachers Local 27—was far more aggressive in articulating its position against *Song of the South*. In a column in the *Washington Post*, President Paul Cooke noted that the film was of poor aesthetic quality, but "more important it is insidious because the Negro is presented treacherously and slyly in the conventional stereotype." Cooke then relayed many of the common

criticisms of the film's depiction. He insisted that while Baskett handles the role well, the character of Uncle Remus "is unfortunately the fixed conception of the Negro as a lazy, hat-in-hand, spiritual-singing, inferior 'old rascal.'" The local AFT president then argued that *Song of the South* could have portrayed Remus as an artist or businessman without being anachronistic, since the film doesn't depict life just the way it happened to be in the post-Reconstruction South. He, too, called for a boycott of the film:

> The picture offers only the Negro in service to white people, the Negro apparently whose only thought is to help solve the problems of the white people.
>
> Inasmuch as "*Song of the South*" abuses the Negro in every way possible, there is little in the picture to recommend. The American Federation of Teachers, Local 27, in full meeting, condemned the picture.[38]

Cooke's comments were picked up weeks later in African American newspapers.[39] While many progressive teachers and their unions might be expected to take an overtly activist stand, not all educators at the time felt the same way about *Song of the South*. A month earlier, a wing of the National Review Board called the "Schools Motion Picture Committee" recommended the film for children. The committee was described in the paper as "a voluntary organization of teachers and parents of pupils in local public and private elementary and high schools." The group listed *Song of the South* as one of ten films (including a reissue of Disney's *Fantasia*) currently playing in the New York City area that were suitable for eight- to fourteen-year-olds.[40]

As with nearly every critical response to the film, the AFT's note in the *Post* initiated passionate responses—both supportive and critical. Bowles objected with the argument that *Song of the South* "was a new medium for entertainment, something which would bring pleasure to all who saw it."[41] Bowles also became one of the first to suggest that *Song of the South* was representing an unfortunate historical reality, wherein blacks were subservient to whites. "Some people," wrote Bowles, "have reached a state of mind where they feel that they must attack everything which does not portray the Negro as a perfect 'artisan or business' person. These people stir up hatred and ill feeling doing little good by forgetting that no race is perfect no matter how loudly they proclaim otherwise. You cannot destroy history by shouting. 'Song of the South' is

set in its historical time as were 'Caesar and Cleopatra' and 'Gone with the Wind.'"[42] Problematic comparisons to *Gone with the Wind* as another acceptably accurate cinematic representation of the past continue to this day. Directly opposing this, however, Jacqueline Griffin, a student at the Miner Teachers College, noted what she saw as the film's typical portrayal of the Uncle Tom stereotype. She argued for a more inclusive depiction of African Americans during this time: "It is evident that such persons [who defend the film as historically accurate] don't realize that there were 'artisans and businessmen.' Why then continually distort history by giving the impression that the only Negro was he who worked on the plantation and recognized the white man as his master?"[43] Her voice intervened on the particular question of the film's historical accuracy. Griffin noted that African Americans would not object to historically accurate depictions of slavery and plantation life, provided that deliberately fantastical films such as *Song of the South* did not constitute the extent of Hollywood's efforts in this regard.

CINEMATIC STEREOTYPES

At the core of these responses to *Song of the South* by Cooke, Bowles, and Griffin was the question of what constituted an acceptable, non-stereotypical presentation of African Americans. These letters reiterated how, by the 1940s, a wide range of supportive and resistant audiences were well aware of the damaging stereotypes *Song of the South* perpetuated. Audiences, film critics, and cultural scholars all referenced these dated images as part of their criticism. Another letter to the *Post* explicitly contextualized *Song of the South* in relation to pre–World War II cinematic (and radio) stereotypes: "Hollywood has always leaned over backwards in an attempt to portray American Negroes as sort of Amos 'n' Andy buffoons, who stand, Phi Beta Kappa key on chain, in a hat-in-hand Uncle Tom attitude before the gates of justice, vainly waiting admittance. 'Song of the South' is no exception to the usual movie caricature of our colored citizens and Walt Disney has nothing to be proud of, with all due respects to the genteel original author, Joel Chandler Harris."[44] Over the decades, critics and audiences would become more protective of Harris's property and more critical of Disney's reframing. Fans of Harris in the 1940s could not have anticipated how much the film and subsequent Disney and Golden Books versions would come to replace Harris's as the dominant conception of Brer Rabbit in Ameri-

can culture. Through various cinematic, televisual, and literary means, most American children growing up after 1946 came to know an Uncle Remus who was mostly Disney's creation.

Still, the literary version of Uncle Remus was not always seen as a positive image either. Writing for the progressive Jewish magazine *Commentary*, Bernard Wolfe authored a scathing piece on Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit in 1949. While acknowledging the Disney film and its lingering presence in songs and children's books, Wolfe offered a detailed criticism of the original literary creation. "Uncle Remus—a kind of blackface Will Rogers, complete with standard minstrel dialect and plantation shuffle," he wrote, "has had remarkable staying power in our popular culture, much more than Daddy Long Legs, say, or even Uncle Tom."[45] Unlike critics in the 1980s and 1990s like Patricia Turner and Peggy Russo, Wolfe's effort was not to preserve Harris's legacy as a genuine collection of rare African American slave folklore (if framed through a white perspective). Turner and Russo regarded *Song of the South* as a distortion of Harris, whose work they see as one of the few surviving links to original oral slave narratives. Wolfe believed that Harris's work itself was a considerable distortion of those same oral slave stories. Wolfe's article helped illuminate the ways that the Uncle Remus stereotype and the remediation of Brer Rabbit have always been controversial.

While mostly interested in questions of aesthetics, film critics saw the stereotypes as well. In an article titled "Spanking Disney," Crowther criticized the studio's use of generic Hollywood live action when he considered Disney's one true artistic gift to be animation. Yet he also acutely criticized the film's racial representations. The critic structured the piece as a series of spankings—"wham!"[46]—followed by reasons why *Song of the South* was inadequate. In his critique of Disney's treatment of race, he notes:

> Old Uncle Remus (James Baskett) is just the sweetest and most wistful darky slave that ever stepped out of a sublimely unreconstructed fancy of the Old South.
>
> As a matter of fact—wham!—you've committed a peculiarly gauche offense in putting out such a story in this troubled day and age. For no matter how much one argues that it's childish fiction, anyhow, the master-and-slave relation is so lovely regarded in your yarn, with the Negroes bowing and scraping and singing spirituals in the night, that

one might almost imagine that you figure Abe Lincoln had
made a mistake. Put down the mint julep, Mr. Disney![47]

Crowther's echo of White's phrase "master-and-slave relationship" (which
had been published at the same time and in the same section of the *New
York Times*) was not a coincidence. Much of Crowther's criticism was
motivated first and foremost by aesthetic frustrations, and his critique of
the film's politics was a means to further support his initial objections.
Would Crowther have been so harsh had the film not been a Disney
product, and had it not been so artistically weak? After all, Crowther
closed his "spanking" with the assertion that "worst of all—wham!—from
a strictly artistic point of view you have permitted a sad misapplication
of your art and your name" by including the cartoon sequences "with all
their fantastic joie de vivre, in a hackneyed and smug 'live action' story."[48]
Other critics focused on the grotesque stereotypes as well. Manny Farber
wrote in the *New Republic* that *Song of the South* presented "plantation
life as paradise for lucky slaves."[49] In fairness, he also noted that it was
"the first movie in years in which colored and white mingle throughout,
and where both are handled with equal care and attention." Still, Farber
felt that the depiction of the South was deceptive. Baskett, he added, "is
so skillful in registering contentment that even the people who believe
in the virtues of slavery are going to . . . want to know his secret."[50]

Not all critics agreed with this reading, even if they recognized the
stereotype. In late January 1947, as *Song of the South* began a theatrical
run at the Pantages and Hillstreet Theatres, Philip K. Scheuer largely
praised the film in the *Los Angeles Times*, though his review was not un-
conditionally positive. In particular—like Crowther—he found the live
action sequences underwhelming. Yet overall he believed that Disney
"has managed the smoothest integration yet, both technical and dra-
matic, of cartoon and live action."[51] Written two months after the film's
original debut in Atlanta, Scheuer's review acknowledged the racial con-
troversy that had emerged around the film. "Criticism has been raised in
the East by the racially conscious," he wrote, "that, in portraying Uncle
Remus as the stereotype of the lazy, shiftless (but admittedly lovable)
southern Negro, the film performs a disservice."[52] Scheuer dismissed the
criticism, arguing that Uncle Remus was a likeable enough character
who did not harm anyone. "Besides," he added, "this is the postbellum
South as Harris described it."[53]

Likewise, there was some support within the African American com-

munity, though it would be a mistake to argue that the response was evenly split. One *Defender* article stated that the film used "exceptional dialect of the period (1860)" and that "there is nothing in the story or the screening for anyone to become squeamish about."[54] Moreover, the *Defender* writer Lawrence LaMar remained a champion of the film well into the next year after its release. Writing in July 1947 to promote its Oscar chances, LaMar summarized what he saw as conflicting viewpoints on the film: "One opposing school of thought maintain[ed] that the story material was a reflection on the Negro, and that it was antebellum and 'Uncle Tommish,' while the other asserted that it was a mere whimsical fairy tale and no harm would be suffered through its filming."[55] LaMar privileged the latter, citing the fact that Baskett was one of the first starring roles for African Americans ever offered in Hollywood. Yet, as another *Defender* reporter noted, Baskett was denied appropriate billing as the star of the film,[56] highlighting how segregation limited the actor's achievement. To prove the film's appeal, LaMar cited a Gallup research poll, which placed *Song of the South* ahead of other 1946 films such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* and Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. But he didn't state where the Disney film ranked overall, or what the specifics of the poll were. Meanwhile, another *Defender* article covering the film's Atlanta premiere confirmed Bernstein's findings. It reported that the film was being "hailed here . . . as bringing a new spirit of tolerance and understanding between the races in America's tense melting pot."[57] But the article is not flattering overall, complimenting the performance of Baskett more than the movie itself. While covering the premiere, the *Defender* documented the audience's response: "Although the story was laid in a southern plantation, antiquated locale somewhat obnoxious to the aspirations of a people getting away from slavery time settings—the film brought tears and laughter alike from Negroes and whites who thrilled to the superb performance of Baskett and other stars, together with Disney's animation."[58] The ambivalence in the passage is indicative of the generally mixed feelings in the *Defender* regarding *Song of the South*. While degrading on many levels, the film did at least aspire to some measure of racial harmony, however conditional and illusory.

Appropriate to this atmosphere of ambivalence, not every *Defender* article was sympathetic to the Disney film. Covering Powell's attempt to ban *Song of the South*, another writer argued that it was "inconceivable that Hollywood can do what most of the film critics have stated—go back to the nineteen twenties of racial and religious prejudice."[59] Shortly after the film's premiere, the *Defender* further drew out the conflict emerg-

ing among African Americans. While reactions in the black community were "perhaps a little divided . . . as a whole, at the conclusion of the preview showing, they considered the real-life cartoon a backward step in representation of the Negro."[60] Specifically cited were the depiction of a plantation context and Uncle Remus, though this writer, too, generally supported Baskett's effort: "The film confused many of its spectators at the special preview showing as it is a skillful blending of delightful music and cartooning with a stereotype of the ancient southern pre–Civil War Negro complete with handkerchief and 'yassas.'"[61] While Uncle Remus is sympathetic around the little children, the article added, when in the company of the film's white adults, he reverts to a degrading Tom stereotype.

Decades later, scholars would criticize *Song of the South* for its frame narrative, which moved the Uncle Remus stories too far from the implicitly African American subtexts of Brer Rabbit and toward the white contexts of the Southern plantation and the white boy's experiences. But this article did not object to the framing, insisting only that the film should have confined the story to Uncle Remus and the children:

> Disney would have run much less risk of offending Negroes had he refrained from weaving in as much story continuity as he had, and left "Song of the South" a picture of the three children and Remus. His instinct in reviving the wise and humorous tales was good—no one can object violently to folk lore as such. But in the absence of the realistic portrayal by Hollywood of any Negroes, Disney's hybrid folklore and semi-realistic social production was a real mistake. As long as Hollywood refuses to portray modern Negroes truthfully, flights into the servile past, no matter how sincere, will always be resented.[62]

Yet confining the story to Remus and the children would have offended those audiences who resisted the image of a strong African American male presence, uninhibited by the oversight of white adults. It would have also undermined the film's attempt to mimic *Gone with the Wind*'s melodrama. Overall, the article summarized adeptly some of the critical ambivalence of African American communities toward the film, even in the North, an attitude that ultimately undermined black protests against *Song of the South*.

Of course, some took issue with the larger stereotype of a romanti-

cized Old South, and less with race in particular. The *Washington Post* published a response that noted that fans of Harris were not likely to be "particularly pleased at the incidental treatment of [the Uncle Remus tales] in the midst of the tedious hokem [*sic*] of the non-animated part" of the movie.[63] Signed with the initials "H. C. T.," this letter criticized *Song of the South* not because of the racial content, but because of the film's sentimental, Northern depiction of a pastoral South. This proved a direct contrast to the *Defender*'s general assessment that "the South . . . seems pleased with the picture."[64] Even people from the region itself were not always happy with its representation. "None of your letter comment on '*Song of the South*,'" began H. C. T.:

> has pointed up the fact that [the film] is the sort of phoney that Southerners loathe. They have taken it in good part because poor Disney intended it as a compliment. But in the South of Uncle Remus, the gentry of the plantation, even in the isolated big country town of Atlanta, did not use an upstage accent, they did not look about them as if trying to get the eye of the head waiter at the Stork Club, their little boys were not kept dressed up, and the Negroes did not sing Tin-Pan-Alley songs in northern voices under an experienced choir leader.[65]

H. C. T. believed that *Song of the South* was part of a larger literary and stage tradition stretching back to the late nineteenth century. This legacy developed "when the North was smoothing over the hate of the Civil War by sentimentalizing the South, with emphasis on moons and magnolias and Negroes singing on Cabin steps."[66] The writer rejected the film's idyllic presentation of the Old South, but with less interest specifically in its representation of African Americans. The anonymous H. C. T. may have felt that such a point was already made, but it is entirely possible that he or she also intended to marginalize the racial tensions the film's controversy invoked.

   The only way to defend the film's stereotyping might have been to ignore it entirely. Another letter on *Song of the South* published in the *Post* suggested as much. Cryptically identified as "White Texan," this writer noted that others were disingenuously reframing the debate by suggesting that whites were treated just as negatively as were blacks: "Those Swiftean wits who satirically suggest that the Snuffy Smith type of cari-

cature should be objected to as reflections of the white race if protest is to be made at the caricaturing of Negro characters in such productions as 'Song of the South,' overlook an important circumstance present in the buffooning of Negro characters."[67] The author posited that other people must be behaving ironically to suggest that the depiction of whites in *Song of the South* was as demeaning as the depiction of African Americans. He or she proceeded to argue that degrading images of white people, such as the hillbilly comic strip character "Snuffy Smith," are never held up in the media as representative of an entire race. Yet "Uncle Toms," "Stepin Fetchits," and other stereotypes were almost always used to create racist generalizations in the white media. Whereas white people were represented in a seemingly endless variety of roles—some less positive than others—African American roles benefited from no such range. The question of racial generalizations rested at the heart of *Song of the South* and stereotypes of African Americans. As a result, *Song of the South* was nothing short of "discrimination in 'art.'"[68]

NEGOTIATING DISNEY'S CRITICAL LEGACY

Critics too were concerned with the question of "art," but with less attention to "discrimination." Their sense of artistic merit went hand in hand with the larger issue of Disney's legacy as a film studio. White's statement appeared in the *New York Times* immediately following Crowther's first review of *Song of the South*, one that was less interested in racial stereotypes than his second one would be. The review began by noting the increasing use of live action in Disney's films at the expense of animated sequences: "By just those proportions has the magic of these films decreased. . . . The ratio of 'live' to cartoons is approximately two to one—and that is approximately the ratio of its mediocrity to charm."[69] While labeling the live action scenes a "travesty of the antebellum South," Crowther was not overwhelmed by the animation either. In contrast to this film's "mawkish" romance, "the cartoon episodes, when they do intrude, assume refreshing proportions that they probably do not actually have."[70] In several articles, Crowther was one of the few journalists overtly attentive to the fact that much of the innovation was driven more by costs than by aesthetics. Identifying what he called "the law of diminishing artistic returns," he believed that "in

[Disney's] move towards economy with 'live action,' he has moved towards a perilous trap. If he doesn't beware, a huge Tarbaby will snarl his talents worse than poor Br'er Rabbit's limbs."[71] An early advocate of Disney because of the company's artistic innovations, Crowther became increasingly uninterested in the studio's work as it gravitated unsuccessfully toward this new hybrid style of filmmaking.

Yet Crowther was hardly alone among film critics in criticizing the film's aesthetics. At the end of 1946, the *Times*' Thomas Pryor listed *Song of the South* as one of the year's big disappointments. "The cartoon sequences—the tales of Br'er Rabbit and his animal friends—are not in the best Walt Disney tradition, but still they're amusingly rambunctious," he wrote. However, "it was in dressing up these episodes with a maudlin story about a little fellow whose mama and papa don't get along anymore that Mr. Disney's show went into a tailspin."[72] Pryor did not mention the race controversy activated by the film, and barely mentioned the character of Uncle Remus. Like Crowther, he was more interested in lamenting the awkward mix of live action and animation.

But Pryor pointed to a key aspect of the film that was often otherwise marginalized: divorce. That *Song of the South* was also about a boy coping with his parents' separation was overlooked at the time in favor of aesthetic and racial concerns, which points toward important gaps in reception that future responses would highlight. Subsequent textual responses—such as Bret Lott's short story in 2004, and Bill Vaughn's autobiographical article a year later—suggested that this aspect of the film might have been one key to long-term nostalgic attachments. A child experiencing parental separation (from divorce or war) could find a potentially deep point of identification with Johnny. This coexists with, but is not automatically reducible to, the racial tensions also created by the film. For Pryor, such trite melodramatic narrative development becomes a source of derision for *Song of the South*; young audiences, though, may have had different responses.

Also evoking Disney's legacy, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* critic Mae Tinee liked the film even less, writing that "the cartoons seemed to me to lack the old Disney touch."[73] While noting that Harris's original tales ranked with the most popular literature of "all time," Tinee's take on their adaptation was less enthusiastic. Although no fan of the animation, she greatly disliked the live action. She saw the film's plot as excessively abusing the main child protagonist, both mentally and physically: "First his father leaves, for reasons I never did understand. Then, he's bedecked

in a velvet suit with lace collar, set upon by local bullies, given a puppy and forbidden to keep it, misses his own birthday party, and eventually is deprived of even the solace of Uncle Remus and his tales and nearly killed [by an angry bull] before he's happy once more."[74] Tinee's focus with the film is on a boy who is "so cute, it's too bad to see him achieve complete happiness only at what seems to be death's door."[75] She also reiterated in passing how the father's absence is ambiguous at best. This is a twist, as I noted in the previous chapter, that some have tried to interpret as a progressive narrative move, yet this take reads more into the film than is really there.

MODEST INDUSTRIAL SUPPORT

There was clearly a jarring disconnect between differing reactions to the film, just as Bowles noted. But most of *Song of the South*'s positive buzz came from within the industry. The reviewer for Hollywood's prominent trade publication, *Variety*, had an encouraging response, though not without some critical reservation. Despite the film's "great deal of charm," *Song of the South* was also "sometimes sentimental, slow and overlong." Like Tinee, the *Variety* reviewer pointed directly to one of the film's central ambiguities—"the confused and insufficiently explained estrangement of the parents." Still, the review was supportive overall, with the strongest emphasis placed on the film's aesthetics: "Some excellent Technicolor effects heighten the picture of an idealized, romanticized South, with its plantations, stately manors, campfire meetings and colored mammies. Alternate live and cartoon stories are interwoven smartly, with the occasional combination of real and animated figures handled with imagination and skill. Most of the songs are above average, with one, 'Zip-adee-do-da' [*sic*] likely to be one of the season's favorites. The usual distinctive Disney touches are sprinkled throughout."

Being an industry paper, *Variety* promoted the still novel idea of using Technicolor film in 1946. Few other critics applauded Disney's use of Technicolor in *Song of the South*. While most Hollywood films were still shot in black and white at the time, Disney had been using color since the early 1930s. *Variety* made a note of Disney's product differentiation. As with many critical responses, the technological advances overrode race relations. *Variety* offered an uncritical take on the film's represen-

tation of race and its "colored mammies." The review also noted that "cartoon animals with Southern Negro accents" were one of the film's "brilliant touches," and that Baskett, "with his fat, round black face and scraggly white beard, is also as warming a portrait as had been seen in a long time." Unlike others, *Variety* saw the African American stereotypes as one of the film's virtues. Fulfilling its trade obligations, the review accurately predicted the film's box office prospects, noting that "it will do okay."[76] *Variety*'s review of *Song of the South* should be read with a healthy amount of skepticism: it appeared in print six days before the film's world premiere in Atlanta, and Disney had just poured thousands of dollars into advertising the film within the magazine's pages.

Disney's biggest support consistently came from within the industry. The famed Hollywood gossip columnist Louella Parsons attempted to promote *Song of the South* as an Oscar contender.[77] The extent of its eventual success was "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" winning the award for Best Original Song, and Walt Disney successfully lobbying the Academy for Baskett to receive an honorary Oscar, the first African American male to win one. The columnist Nelson Bell also wrote a favorable piece in the Christmas Day edition of the *Washington Post*, promoting *Song of the South*'s "entertainment of universal and infallible appeal."[78] Aside from the lavish praise, Bell is unique in privileging the children's performances over that of the adults, while also finding the live action sequences as effective and artistic as the animation and the music. Bell avoided the race controversy, though his use of the even-then derogatory term "pickaninnies" (to identify Johnny's African American friend Toby) may be particularly telling. Instead, Bell described *Song of the South* as a "universal" film that would appeal to every "age and taste,"[79] a deliberate attempt to ignore the racial tensions the film had created.

Three weeks later, he again referenced *Song of the South* in an article on the UK's top box office hits from 1946. Bell wrote that "*Song of the South* goes sailing along into its fourth week at RKO-Keiths."[80] Since his previous column, figures such as Bowles and Griffin had written heated responses in those same pages. Bell's metaphor suggested that *Song of the South* had survived something of a critical storm. At the same time, though, Bell also noted that Disney's film was set to be pulled from the theater the following week to make room for Ginger Rogers's *Magnificent Doll* (1946). For Bell, *Song of the South* represented one of several recent examples (along with the Bing Crosby/Fred Astaire vehicle *Blue Skies*, 1946; and the espionage tale *13 Rue Madeleine*, 1947, starring James Cagney) of Hollywood's continuing dominance worldwide.

WHAT WOULD BECOME OF DISNEY
AND *SONG OF THE SOUTH*?

By the tail end of the film's first distribution in the late 1940s, supporters and critics alike began assessing the film's reputation overall. Critics and industry insiders weren't the only ones concerned with how *Song of the South* would affect the company's legacy. Disney himself wrote an editorial in the *Washington Post* a month after the film was released, explaining why he made the film. It would be tempting to impose a certain amount of authorial intent on both the article and the film. Given Walt's own immeasurable power and influence, it would be foolish to completely discount that perspective. But this article reveals not only Disney's position as producer, but also the role of *Disney himself as audience.* The column was his attempt to come to terms with *Song of the South's* initial response as much as it was his effort to shape people's perceptions of the film. Disney did not frame the use of live action as a practical business decision, but rather as a necessary artistic innovation: "I always felt the Uncle Remus character—one of the great legendary figures of literature—should be played by a living actor. The other important persons should also be humans. The folk tales, themselves, however, could only be treated adequately in animation. . . . That, in turn, required a new screen story-telling device—a combination of action by a complete human cast and cartoon animation such as never before undertaken on such a scale."[81] Defending its aesthetics, Disney posited Uncle Remus not as an African American cinematic character or stereotype, but as an important literary figure. Mapping such prestige onto the project deflected attention away from the studio's influence and toward Harris. As Disney wrote, the story "must be told in the tradition of the author and without stepping outside the character or material."[82] While scholars later debated how much of the film accurately reflected the written stories, Disney consistently promoted *Song of the South* as a faithful adaptation.

He resisted the idea that the film was a product of his own vision at all, save for the technological advances necessary to realize the stories. Disney made more explicit references to Harris than did others at the time, hoping to reframe the film's controversies as steeped in (and protected by) larger issues of literary heritage. Disney concluded with an appeal to his own childhood nostalgia as a justification of the decision to adapt the Brer Rabbit stories: "One final reason why we selected Uncle Remus tales: I have been familiar with them since boyhood, have seen

them vie with other immortal tales for widest distribution. They must have something of great worth, else 'why,' in the words of Uncle Remus, 'do they last so long?'"[83] *Song of the South* was both received within and framed by the seemingly innocuous discourse of childhood. That the film was a product for kids has long marked sympathetic discussions of the film. Moreover, Disney's comments revealed a key selling point for *Song of the South*, which would often return in the years to come: The film's presumed appeal depended on the temporal disjunction between the literary past (Harris) and the technological future (groundbreaking animation techniques). Both functioned to obscure the present.

The longer *Song of the South* endured, the more its defenders repositioned it within this longer literary history. Yet Disney's affection for the original literary stories undermined what Bernard Wolfe himself had identified: the joke of the Brer Rabbit tales was on white audiences. By 1949, Wolfe too was mostly concerned with *Song of the South* in relation to Harris's legacy. "Is it too far-fetched to take Brer Rabbit as a symbol," Wolfe asked, "about as sharp as Southern sanctions would allow—of the Negro slave's festering hatred of the white man?"[84] But Wolfe believed that Harris took the anger of the slave narratives and "fitted the hate-imbued folk materials into a framework, a white man's framework, of 'love.'"[85]

Patricia Turner, James Snead, and others years later felt that a shift from the parables of black agency began with Disney's decision to use a live action frame narrative. This de-emphasized Uncle Remus as a story-teller and made the adventures of Brer Rabbit a parable for the already-privileged white child Johnny's own survival in life. Sorting out the remnants of slave agency in the different versions of Brer Rabbit anticipated the complexities that would later develop as a part of *Song of the South*'s own reception history. Just as nostalgia later became an inseparable part of its reception, the long passage of time also forced scholars to reconsider trying to hold onto Harris's own work as a rare trace of oral slave heritage, regardless of its inherent racism. Harris's literature was ubiquitous in the 1940s, yet by the end of the century he was for some a last sliver of connection, however problematic. Wolfe could not have foreseen how much the company's appropriation of Harris would radically reframe the debate around the Uncle Remus tales.

Disney's version of Brer Rabbit, not Harris's, would become its public perception—but not yet. Wolfe's article in the late 1940s revealed an interesting early moment in the evolution of *Song of the South*. His overall critique is not of the film, but of the books' meaning and reception. The

Disney version was merely symptomatic, Wolfe suggested, of the larger success and enduring legacy of Harris's own problematic work. Yet the article's introduction did stress the significant role that the film and its early paratexts played in renewing interest in the older stories. Wolfe's essay was one of the first to acknowledge that *Song of the South* had changed the popular perception, if only slightly, of Harris's legacy. The paradox in Wolfe's article is that Disney was still marginalized as part of a larger critique that highlighted what he saw as Harris's distortion of oral slave history.

Wolfe's focus reminds us that, three years after its theatrical appearance, *Song of the South* was not really taken that seriously. He felt Harris's tales were far more damaging in their representations of African Americans. Yet Wolfe's evocation of *Song of the South*'s multi-textual presence acknowledged that something had changed. For all the controversy, Disney was not yet through with *Song of the South*. Harris's centrality in the history of Uncle Remus was shifting. Wolfe, in his own way, first understood the cultural power in continuing to *remediate* Uncle Remus. As the next chapter will show, Disney's early strategies of convergence and cross-media promotion were ultimately more responsible for *Song of the South*'s long-term survival than was the film itself.

Three   "OUR MOST

REQUESTED MOVIE"

*Media Convergence, Black Ambivalence,
and the Reconstruction of* Song of the South

*Never before in its history had Hollywood reissued so
many films with so much success:* Gone with the Wind
(1967–68), Swiss Family Robinson *(1969),* 101 Dal-
matians *(1970),* Song of the South *(1972),* The Sound
of Music *(1973),* Mary Poppins *(1973),* Robin Hood
*(1974). These reissues' formal and thematic conservatism
implied the existence of a longing for traditional modes
and the established mythologies they represented.*

ROBERT RAY, *A CERTAIN TENDENCY OF
THE HOLLYWOOD CINEMA, 1930–1980*

In *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema*, Robert
Ray noted a "right cycle" movement in the 1970s.[1] This included both
new reactionary films, such as *Dirty Harry* (1971), and the recirculation
of older films, such as Disney's *Song of the South*, from Hollywood's
so-called golden age. Ray's observation reminds us of the sometimes-
forgotten fact that the *re*appearance of a film can be more important than
its first appearance. In the 1940s, the cinematic "Old South" had been
anachronistic for many post–World War II audiences. But decades later,
such nostalgic texts suddenly came back into vogue, changing funda-
mentally how these films' histories were later perceived. The subsequent
rereleases of *Song of the South*, especially during the 1970s and 1980s,
are the most overlooked, but also revealing, parts of its reception history.

There is another aspect of Ray's argument that is important. Seem-
ingly out of the blue, *Song of the South* was now *popular*. After its 1946
debut, the film spent twenty-five years uneventfully in and out of circula-
tion. This included its first rerelease a decade later in 1956, which was
met with a largely indifferent critical and commercial reception. The

film appeared in the 1950s not because it was in demand; rather, even before then, Disney figured out that its biggest profits often came from rereleasing the same material to a new generation of children. *Song of the South* was no different in that regard. Yet still the film underwhelmed. Moreover, the film's racial politics made it even less worth the trouble. Thus *Song of the South* largely spent the years between 1946 and 1972 hidden in the Disney vault. Yet upon its second rerelease, *Song of the South* was suddenly more successful than it had ever been before.

It would have made sense if Disney had left *Song of the South* for dead by the 1960s. Critics dismissed its lame live action melodrama, while activists lamented its Uncle Tom representations. Meanwhile, the film barely recouped Disney's considerable investment. The film had been the company's big postwar hope for another *Snow White*–sized hit, but within a few years it was largely forgotten. As late as 1970, Disney announced through *Variety* that *Song of the South* would never be released again, because of its racial insensitivity. They made this announcement only because, Disney now claimed, it was the "most requested title" in the Disney vault.[2] One theater owner, Jeff Begun, was even quoted as calling the film, quite inexplicably, a "classic."[3] Not surprisingly, within two years, Disney rereleased the film in 1972. This time, it proved the biggest rerelease in company history—despite never having been successful before, and having even been briefly "banned."

In the span of three decades, *Song of the South* went from being a black eye to one of the company's most valuable assets. The film earned over $6 million in only a few months after its January 1972 rerelease. This doubled its total haul from the 1940s, and surpassed the 1969 rerelease of *Swiss Family Robinson* (1960) as the highest-grossing Disney reissue at that point in the company's history.[4] *Song of the South* was on *Variety*'s list of "Top-Grossing Films" from January 26 to April 5 that year, reaching as high as fifth on February 2.[5] The film's success was so pronounced that Disney then rereleased it again for a limited engagement a little over a year later in June 1973.[6] During the 1980s, *Song of the South*'s box office business was similarly impressive—grossing nearly $17 million more during two additional reissues between late 1980 and 1987.[7] I will argue throughout the next several chapters that *Song of the South*'s reputation is really a product of the 1970s and 1980s. Although produced originally in the 1940s, the film only became *timely* thirty years into its existence, and then started its run as a successful cult text for the next twenty years. It is the 1972 reissue of *Song of the South*—and the post–civil rights myth that the film was always popular—that is remembered today.
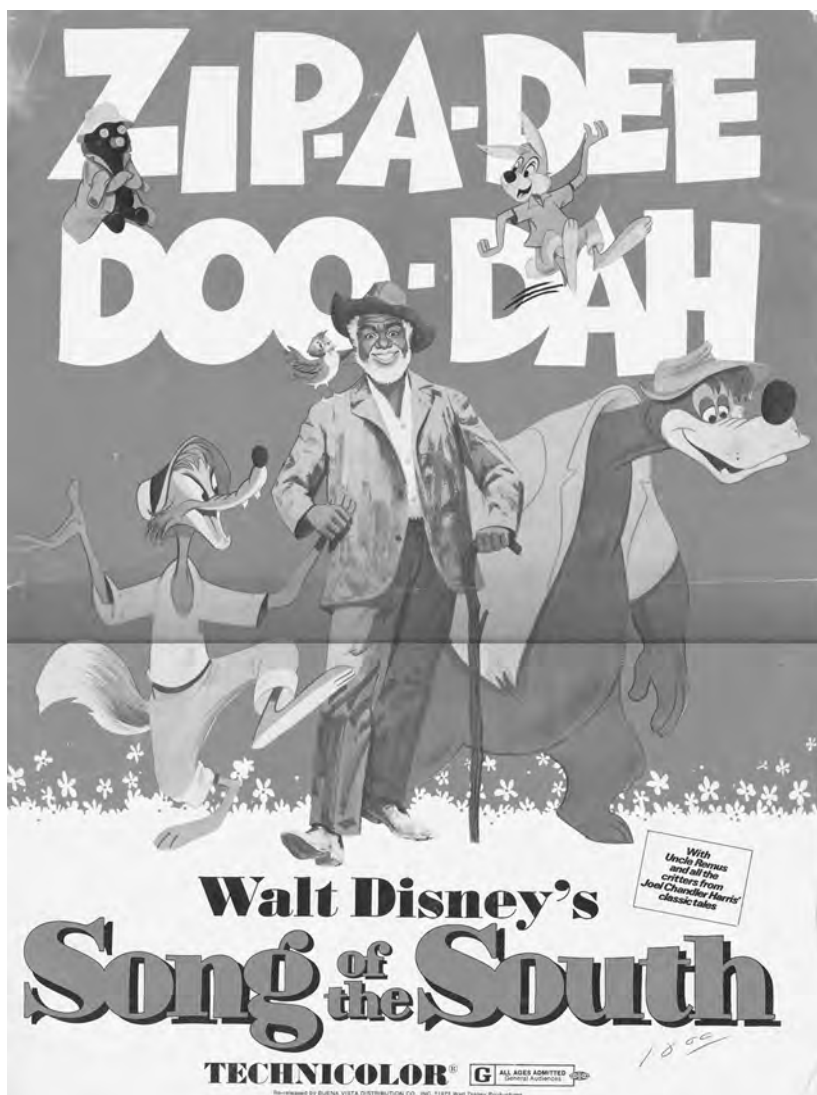
A common promotional image for the 1972 rerelease of Song of the South. *Note the nice '70s suit Uncle Remus wears here, a far cry from the tattered outfit he wears in the movie itself.*

Still the question remains—what *did* happen over the course of three decades that changed perceptions of *Song of the South* from an anachronistic disappointment, to being seen as a highly sought-after "classic"? Answering that question—documenting what *led up to* the film's eventual success in the 1970s—is the goal of the present chapter. The decline of the civil rights movement and the rise of the white backlash in the late 1960s was one important factor. Yet even within African American communities, there was often an ambivalent attitude toward *Song of the South*. Through subsequent decades, Baskett's "historic" achievement—the first black man to win an Academy Award—complicated some people's attitudes toward the movie itself. The biggest factor explaining *Song of the South*'s reemergence, though, was that Disney itself changed—the corporation and its media offerings, along with the cultural and critical assessments of the company among American audiences.

Disney's transmedia ubiquity evokes the notion of the "paratext," the peripheral material—trailers, books, albums, toys, and so forth—that surround a primary text, such as a theatrical film or network television program. If noticed at all, these ancillary, ephemeral artifacts traditionally have been viewed as doing little more than promoting, exploiting, and solidifying audience attachment to the main text a studio or network is trying to sell. Yet, as Jonathan Gray recently argued, these same marginal documents are crucial to framing a text's meaning. This is particularly important when people sometimes spend more time personally engaging with a paratext (such as a video game tie-in to a blockbuster movie) than with the text being promoted. "When [in today's market] Disney might make several hundred dollars' worth of product sales off a single young consumer compared to the child's paltry five dollars at the box office," Gray writes, "we might be foolish to see the film as ipso facto the 'primary text.'"[8] For decades media studies has focused on analyzing the main text when trying to understand a film or television program's cultural and historical impact. Yet such textual analysis is incomplete. Instead, "hype, synergy, promos, narrative extensions, and various forms of related textuality position, define and create meaning for film and television."[9] Specific audiences and historical contexts have played a key role in the construction of a film's "meaning." And there remains a wider history of paratextuality still unexplored, but which is crucial to understanding the cultural impact of most any major Hollywood text.

In the twenty-six years between *Song of the South*'s first (1946) and third (1972) releases, Disney expanded its media products far beyond the movie screen, offering one of the earliest iterations of a fully formed

One of the many Song of the South *paratexts that circulated in the mid to late twentieth century. This version of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby included both a book and a record to read along to. Disneyland records first released it in the early 1970s.*

convergence culture. Although Disney had been licensing its characters to toy producers, book publishers, and record companies since the late 1920s, the company's vision really came into focus after World War II. By the 1950s, writes Christopher Anderson, "Disney's movies were subsumed into an increasingly integrated leisure market that also included television, recorded music, theme parks, tourism, and consumer merchandise."[10] The heart of this empire in particular was Disneyland. By the middle of the 1950s, in an early moment of literal convergence, the word "Disneyland" simultaneously signified (1) a television show on the ABC network, (2) a theme park in Anaheim, California, (3) a profitable record company, and (4) a series of successful books.

At its core, Disney's business success was due less to the modest artistic innovation that initially garnered it acclaim in the 1930s. In the long run, it was more indebted to the repetition, recirculation, and alteration of their theatrical content as it migrated across multimedia platforms in the second half of the twentieth century. This history of convergence stretched back as far as the 1940s and 1950s. It began with Disney's collaboration with ABC television, Western Printing (Golden Books), Capitol Records, and others. As Disney grew more successful and powerful, it began to form its own ancillary companies, such as Disneyland Records, Buena Vista Distribution, and so forth. At the core of all this, meanwhile, were fragments—books, records, and toys—of a resilient old film whose racist reputation largely kept it out of theaters.

In this chapter, I suggest that Disney's early convergence practices were an integral part of *Song of the South*'s transition from a racially insensitive, historically anachronistic box office failure in 1946 to the biggest rerelease in company history in 1972, despite its disappearance from theaters in a pre–home video age for almost all of the intervening twenty-six years. Largely exploring the period leading up to the film's financially successful return, this chapter outlines three separate, if overlapping, historical conditions that shifted the film's eventual fortunes. The first factor was the rise and fall of the more militant wing of the civil rights movement, which had effectively kept a great deal of offensive content out of theaters and off of television screens; the second was Disney's early transmedia diversification strategies, which anticipated the future theatrical returns of the same old texts they recycled; and the third, in part dependent on the second, was the company's larger critical rebirth as an American institution, which made all older Disney texts in some populist sense "sacred."

RACIAL ATTITUDES, AMBIVALENCE, AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

While I argue that Disney's transmedia ubiquity between the 1950s and 1970s was the central factor in *Song of the South*'s rebirth, it is also important to look closely at how much the racial climate in the United States changed during that same time frame. It's not hard to see why Disney was already leery of *Song of the South* prior to the 1960s. Most famously, in 1968 Richard Schickel published the influential *Disney Version*, a biography widely considered the first critical study of

Disney's larger sexist, racist, and classist representations. At that point, *Song of the South* was little more than a long-since-passed historical curiosity. Schickel noted only briefly what had become commonplace—that the film "contained some pleasant animated sequences devoted to Joel Chandler Harris' tales of life in the briar patch, plus a finale in which the darkies gather 'round the big plantation to sing one of Massah's children back to health—a scene sickening both in its patronizing racial sentiment and its sentimentality."[11] On a quick glance of U.S. racial attitudes in the early 1960s, old Hollywood relics like *Song of the South* had not aged well. Added to that, the film hadn't proven a consistent moneymaker anyway.

During this time, *Song of the South*'s prospective fortunes were met with stiff resistance by the ascendant civil rights movement. World War II had been only the starting point of the organized activism's strength. Comprising several loosely connected organizations, the collective movement in the 1950s and early 1960s built on that postwar success. Aside from increased political clout, they also made considerable gains in terms of influencing media representations in film and television. That strength, meanwhile, only grew over the next decade. Sociologist Doug McAdam noted that the militant wing of the civil rights movement was in its "heyday" by the 1960s, citing public opinion polls of the time: "From 1961 to 1965, the salience of the 'Negro Question' reached such proportions that it consistently came to be identified in public opinion surveys as the most important problem confronting the country. . . . In six of eleven national opinion polls conducted between 1961 and 1965, 'civil rights' was identified as the most important problem facing the country. In three other polls it ranked second. Only twice did it rank as low as fourth."[12] This was not a climate in which Disney wanted to provoke any trouble. A release of *Song of the South* then would tarnish the company's success by needlessly dragging out one of its more insignificant, and certainly problematic, older titles. Along with the film's underwhelming box office, the strength of the civil rights movement was certainly a factor in *Song of the South*'s sustained absence from 1956 to 1972.

Because of heightened sensitivity among whites on issues of race (and the recognition of black audiences as a huge box office demographic), African Americans in Hollywood during the 1950s and early 1960s were no longer defined through overtly degrading, old-fashioned stereotypes. During this time, the "Uncle Tom," "mammy," and "pickaninny" images all so transparently on display in a film like *Song of the South* largely

disappeared beneath the cinematic surface. Likewise, even as the new medium of television briefly brought back some of those same images, activist groups were largely successful in boycotting them off the air. At the same time, despite the progress of "social consciousness" films such as *Pinky* (1949) and *Lost Boundaries* (1949), Hollywood by the 1950s was in another thermidorian phase. It glided by on past formulas and successes, rather than pushing the envelope further. Hollywood films maintained the cultural integrationist logic of earlier World War II representations—films that depicted isolated blacks surrounded by a community of whites. The result was an emphasis on impossibly perfect figures like Sidney Poitier, who for a time reached considerable box office popularity with white and black audiences. He also became the first African American actor to win the Academy Award for Best Actor, for his performance in *Lilies of the Field* (1963).

For Thomas Cripps, the saintly roles Poitier repeatedly played were "a bland anecdote to racial tension."[13] While Cripps recognizes Poitier's genuine success and talent as an actor, the star's popularity ultimately spoke to a regressive cultural appeal. "Much as Eisenhower had defined the national politics of the era . . . ," he writes, Poitier defined "the last years of the genre of the combat movies, each with its lone black hero, that had begun with Walter White's visits to Hollywood in the 1940s."[14] Hence even Poitier's modest success in terms of non-stereotypical representation is largely seen through the lens of a post–World War II cooling-off period, where Hollywood essentially repeated the same formula of modest challenges to stereotypes over a period of almost thirty years. The emergence of Poitier in the 1950s at best reflected a certain standstill in representations of African Americans. Hollywood had learned to avoid the old Uncle Tom stereotypes, but its solution (Poitier) was equally unrealistic.

Even after it left theaters, *Song of the South* continued to serve as symbolic of the lack of a meaningful shift in representation. One periodical to make that connection was *Ebony*, which at the height of the civil rights movement's influence posited Uncle Remus as symptomatic of larger racial problems in the United States at the dawn of the 1950s. A "Photo-Editorial" from a 1952 issue, titled "Educating Our White Folks," was accompanied by a full-page production still of Uncle Remus with Johnny. The article itself is not really about *Song of the South*, except for a brief mention of Uncle Remus as symbolic of the "'good' Negro." The criticism of Disney's film, however, was unmistakable: "So well did they live up to those [white] beliefs that they became embedded into the

minds and stereotyped into the literature and songs of America so that Uncle Tom figures like Uncle Remus . . . are still accepted as true portraits of the Negro."[15] Although *Song of the South* may have quickly disappeared from theaters, Uncle Remus was still visibly representative of the negative perception of African Americans circulating in the media. The essay's larger concern was frustration with white people for having been reluctant or unable to understand African Americans and the black experience in the United States. According to the magazine, it thus fell on what *Ebony* called the "New Negro" to educate whites about what it means to live in different cultural or economic situations. Because the "New Negro," the paper stated, "knows the white man as few whites know the Negro, he has embarked on a crusade to educate the white man to the ways of the Negro."[16]

The Uncle Tom stereotype undermined such a project. Not only were these figures passive, failing to stand up to whites and correct misperceptions, but their generic identity also tapped into preexisting stereotypes and therefore blocked white understanding of other black experiences. "Because they confirm white folks' fixed ideas about Negroes," wrote *Ebony*, "it is hard for whites to understand why they want civil rights and equalities, why they should make themselves unhappy by desiring things they never had."[17] Such an argument also confirms why some defenders of the film were unable to see the problems with Uncle Remus, a representation that already conforms to "fixed ideas about the Negroes." For some, *Song of the South* was offensive not because it shows white audiences anything particularly shocking or derogatory, but because what it shows is not even noticed as being out of the ordinary. Yet, for a while, those stereotypes were successfully removed from theaters.

African Americans on the new medium of television during the 1950s were a very different matter. Yet even this in large measure showed the strength of the civil rights movement. As is often the case in the history of transmedia shifts in the twentieth century, newer platforms often depend on reassuringly conservative content from previous media. Television was no different. As networks began programming new shows to fill the airwaves, the old stereotypes from film and radio, such as the "coon" (*Amos 'n' Andy*) and the "mammy" (*Beulah*), quickly returned. Like many television programs, both *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah* were holdovers from the days of radio and represented the sort of outdated racial stereotypes that *Song of the South* had also perpetuated. Befitting the change in racial attitudes, however, neither lasted very long. The NAACP successfully pressured CBS and ABC, respectively, to remove

the shows after only a couple of seasons in the early 1950s. It is important that this not be confused with substantive long-term progress, though. For one, as evinced by the eventual popularity of older film titles like *Song of the South*, the stereotypes *did* eventually return in full force and with greater resiliency. For another, the disappearance of these shows (along with programs like *The Nat King Cole Show,* which was pulled due to *white* protests) essentially removed all black performers from the airwaves for over a decade.

Given these complicated circumstances, it's important to note that many black audiences were ambivalent about these images, even in the late 1940s and 1950s. While many were frustrated at seeing the old stereotypes return, others were also content to see any people of color on the small screen. In his reception study of *Amos 'n' Andy,* as both a controversial radio program and later television show, Melvin Patrick Ely notes that while the NAACP harshly criticized such content in the early 1950s, the show was also "the only series in the new but already popular medium to have an entirely black cast."[18] This did not negate the concerns many African American audiences had with the program, but it did emphasize the complexity of their reactions. Beyond the mobilization of activist groups, Ely adds, black audiences "in the country at large, however, were divided in their reactions to the television treatment of *Amos 'n' Andy.*"[19] This was less tied to how "offensive" or "negative" the images were in and of themselves, and more—as with Baskett's performance in 1946—to the tempered pride of seeing any African Americans succeed on-screen. Any understanding of responses in black communities to stereotypes during the twentieth century should be viewed within this complicated and constantly shifting context of alternating, coexistent feelings of pride, disappointment, sympathy, and disgust.

Black ambivalence toward *Song of the South* for much of the 1950s and 1960s was similar. As I noted in the previous chapter, Cripps argues that many African American audiences were largely frustrated by *Song of the South* because they had a personal respect for James Baskett's effort. This admiration was only intensified in the immediate years after the film was released. Such attitudes were grounded in two interrelated events that occurred in 1948—the Academy Awards ceremony that year, and the subsequent passing of Baskett. In July 1948, Baskett died at age forty-four of a heart ailment. Services were held at the Fisher's Funeral Home in Los Angeles, and reportedly observed from the outside by more than five thousand people.[20] Obituaries and commentaries of the time prominently featured *Song of the South*. Aside from some work as "Gabby

Gibson" on radio's version of *Amos 'n' Andy* (whose white stars, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, served as pallbearers), the Disney film was the one major project he ever worked on. The *Chicago Defender* even lovingly referred to him as "Uncle Remus" in the front-page headline of his obituary[21] and in the coverage of his memorial service a week later.[22] Tributes to his life's work, including his Oscar-winning effort in *Song of the South*, were understandably celebratory.

Being the first black man to receive an Academy Award (fifteen years before Poitier) complicated the otherwise-resistant reception of *Song of the South*. Baskett's poor health had spurred Disney to promote the actor for an honorary award, which paid off a few months before his passing. Despite the promotional efforts of such journalists as the *Washington Post* columnist Nelson Bell, the *Defender* reporter Lawrence LaMar, and the famed gossip columnist Hedda Hopper, *Song of the South* was not much of an Oscar contender. Only "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" was recognized for Best Original Song. Baskett's honorary award was a source of great pride in the African American community, an accomplishment that often existed in tension with unhappiness about the film itself. Being an Oscar winner did not necessarily grant *Song of the South* any more credibility right away. Yet it did ensure the film's place in American history, especially within the pages of African American newspapers that otherwise had little Academy Award news to celebrate.

In 1954, only five months before *Song of the South*'s reappearance as a segment of the *Disneyland* television show, the *Defender* brought up the legacy of the film in relation to Baskett's honorary Academy Award. Along with Hattie McDaniel's recognition for *Gone with the Wind*, it was the only time the Oscars had recognized the work of African American performers to that point. The article took a historical approach to such landmark work, while also lamenting the continued lack of recognition for others in Academy Awards ceremonies over the years. The writer, Hilda See, argued that a fundamental lack of quality roles for African Americans was the central factor in the Oscars' glaring absence of diversity. As with initial responses to *Song of the South*, See applauded Baskett's performance on its own terms, and instead took issue with the larger industry. "Bias plays no part in the awarding of 'Oscars,' at the time of the awards," See wrote. "If there is a bias we perfer [*sic*] to lay it at the door of the producers and directors." She cited the casting of a white actress in the lead role of *Pinky*, a film about a woman of mixed ethnicity.[23] Even "social consciousness" films had produced few visible opportunities for African American actors, and to that point the Academy had

recognized only those (Baskett and McDaniel) who were showcased in anachronistic, stereotypical roles.

The passage of time may even have softened at least some of the resistance to *Song of the South* in the African American community. In April 1956, the film appeared at Chicago's Regal Theatre, a major social center for the city's black population, over a month after it had played in a white theater downtown.[24] *Song of the South*'s appearance was promoted by glowing articles in the *Defender* that expressed more interest in celebrating Baskett than in condemning Disney's historical misrepresentation. Calling him one of "the great comic artists of our time," the *Defender* pointed out that "he stole the show."[25] Five days later, the *Defender* again reminded viewers of the film's appearance at the Regal: "See it. See the late comedian perform. His acting and singing must be included among the highlights of this Walt Disney production."[26] In both reviews, his work on *Amos 'n' Andy* was as celebrated as his work in *Song of the South*. Baskett's Oscar recognition and death created an aura around his legacy that largely overshadowed much of the resistance to *Song of the South* itself.

Such ambivalence among black communities and a lack of creativity inside the industry invariably established the conditions of possibility for the return of more troubling stereotypes. The only way Hollywood could go back to the lazy reassurance of those old stereotypes was if the United States' larger attitude toward race relations, particularly among whites, were to change. Up to the mid-1960s, the civil rights movement was not only well organized, but also had widespread support among a fair amount of the white population. It reached its peak by 1966, after which, as McAdam shows, the coalition's effectiveness dissipated through geographical shifts, an overcentralization of power, and strategic disagreements among the various organizations that the movement comprised. Yet the change was not due only to a decline in activist and organizational power; *Song of the South*'s return also came on the heels of a larger hostile response to decades of that same civil rights movement.

There was a "white backlash" against civil rights and urban rebellions, beginning with 1966 Republican electoral victories (including the election of Ronald Reagan as governor of California). This culminated in the election of Richard Nixon to the presidency in 1968, thanks to the "Southern strategy"—the successful plan to play on white resentment among Democrats both in the rural South and in Northern urban centers. In general, there was a significant decline in attitudes toward the importance of civil rights and social equality. In a series of Gallup

polls taken during the 1960s and 1970s, white Americans' support for this cause declined sharply. According to McAdam, whereas 52 percent of Americans had identified civil rights as "the most important problem" facing the United States in 1965, by early 1971 only 7 percent still felt the same way. The escalation of the Vietnam conflict was also a central factor in diverting the nation's collective attention.[27]

The heightened racial sensitivity among white populations in the United States after World War II, which had successfully shamed Disney after the release of *Song of the South*, was long gone by the start of the 1970s. So it was not surprising that Uncle Remus would reappear. When *Song of the South* returned in 1972 to the Fox Theatre in Atlanta, where it had originally premiered in 1946, *Variety* quoted the theater owner as saying that "it grossed more money than any picture in any week at regular prices" there. He added that the "audiences have been 'overwhelmingly white.'"[28] By the late 1960s, the power of the civil rights movement had waned and white support dissipated. In its wake, as Ray noted, older, racially insensitive "classics" like *Gone with the Wind* and *Song of the South* would return to considerable theatrical box office receipts.[29]

Somewhere between the white backlash against insurgent activism and urban riots, and the black ambivalence toward James Baskett's legacy, there was surprisingly little critical resistance to *Song of the South*'s return in 1972. There was certainly far less than there had been twenty-six years earlier, and less than there would be in the 1980s. This was partially due to an acceptance of the old stereotypes. Amid *Song of the South*'s large box office reissue, the Black Cinema Library–Research Center in California hosted the "Black Cinema Expo '72." The festival's explicit function was to bring back films from Hollywood's past that had been shelved because of racist stereotypes and show them to new generations. According to the program's director, Stan Myles, "While the films occasionally stretch back to the days of Uncle Tomism, it's necessary to know what they're about in order to progress."[30] Although *Song of the South* was not one of the titles screened, it is likely that such historical ambivalence also tempered black responses to the Disney film. A columnist for the African American newspaper *Oakland Post*, Bill Smallwood, responded to the film's 1972 reappearance with underwhelming outrage. He offered mild skepticism to Disney's insistence that *Song of the South* was one of its most requested titles in the vault: "Disney p.r. people say 'Song of the South' was never truly shelved, although mounting racial criticism did have it 'put away.' I remember the National Negro Congress in NY long ago picketed vigorously [in 1946] and after the film was

reissued in 1956, it stayed in the wings since. Released again, the reason now given is 'fans requested it.' I sure didn't. Did you?"[31] Many people in African American communities might not have been happy to see *Song of the South* reappear, but even this notice in the *Oakland Post* seemed to express annoyance more than any deep-seated resistance. It was certainly not the type of hostile criticism that would greet the next rerelease of *Song of the South*, in 1980. In 1972, the *Los Angeles Times* reporter Wayne Warga claimed that "there have—as yet—been no complaints [about the return of *Song of the South*]. It would seem the change is in the attitude of people as well as attitudes of films." Warga went on to claim that people "know they are seeing a parody," in which they are asked to "suspend their sense of reality and watch a Disney cartoon."[32] While such an argument is difficult to believe, there was not widespread controversy around the film when it finally reappeared. In any event, the popularity of *Song of the South* in 1972 was not taken seriously as symptomatic of a larger white backlash, as it would be eight years later. Then again, regardless of changing racial attitudes, without the power and influence of the Walt Disney Company behind it, *Song of the South* might never have come back at all.

THE "INTER-REFERENTIAL" DISNEY UNIVERSE

Song of the South's miraculous return from the dustbin of film history requires appreciating Disney's larger history with media convergence since the very inception of the company in the 1920s. "Convergence" has become an increasingly commonplace description for various forms of media distribution and reception in the contemporary moment of new media and horizontal corporate integration. Traces and variations of it, however, have roots in the history of twentieth-century American media. Part of my goal in this chapter and throughout the book is to stress a greater awareness of how cross-media and -industry promotion developed historically, using Disney's unique success with convergence, or synergy, as the case study. Although the current entertainment landscape is consciously designed aesthetically and legally to make such transmedia practices more desirable, there are certainly instances that go further back. Understanding how such contemporary practices may evolve in the future can benefit from looking at trends in the past. Meanwhile, more traditional film scholars and specialists in

reception studies can profit from closer attention to issues of paratextuality, since interpretations of particular films can be as bound up in ancillary material as in the text itself.

Historically, however, it is also easy to overemphasize Disney's industrial vision in anticipating the value of cross-promotion and transmedia exploitation. Ancillary texts such as books and records are not simply extensions of the more visible cinematic or televisual text that inspired them. They are also products of, and contributors to, the histories of their own distinctive media. As Jacob Smith has recently documented in *Spoken Word*, various LP and children's book promoters had discovered the economic potential of combining various media for child audiences as early as 1917,[33] decades before Disney began licensing its properties to other media companies, such as Western or Capitol. Looking in particular at the early phenomenon of the "Bubble Book," Smith argues that other companies were quite savvy about marketing to children products that straddled the line between various media. This created a domestic and private media environment that Disney later embraced. The Bubble Books, he writes, "were the first book and record hybrids marketed to children and so represent a pioneering instance of cross-media synergy between book publishing and the record industry."[34] Smith offers a more complicated history of cross-media evolution than has thus far been presented by scholars of media convergence. The histories of many technologies, such as sound recordings, are not easily reducible to the more established accounts of developments in convergence, which stress the branching out of cinematic properties. Disney proved especially apt at identifying and exploiting the existing children's market of products, such as read-along albums, while also anticipating how those markets would be crucial to promoting the theatrical commodities so central to its emergent media empire. I would highlight the extent to which Disney's use of these ancillary markets was distinctly prescient in its anticipation of building a larger brand that not only solidified its own name recognition, but also worked to alter the subsequent reception of its particular titles.

As always, I am focused on the cultural impact of these paratextual developments, and on how they later reshaped audience reactions to *Song of the South*. Disney's expansive cross-media universe does more than shift our historical consciousness in relation to studies on convergence, or problematize the traditional critical hierarchy between a full-length theatrical film and its ancillary material. These innovations and business decisions had a profound impact on how Disney and its early films were

later perceived. They essentially washed away historical memories of initial criticisms and lukewarm box office performance. Part of this was incidental, as much of the company's transmedia plans were motivated by the short-term need for additional revenue streams. In the beginning, most Disney films were not huge financial windfalls, especially in relation to the considerable time and money that went into making them. Nonetheless, these paratexts were powerful in their long-term material impact.

Like all feature-length films, a property such as *Song of the South* was crucial to Disney's media empire, despite its controversial status. Films were only one part of a larger strategy toward Disney's financial success as a multi-textual corporation. By the end of the 1950s, television and the theme park were the company's bigger draws. Yet the feature-length films remained crucial to Disney's larger artistic vision, as Christopher Anderson, Alan Bryman, and others have pointed out. All other convergence products reiterated and reinforced the particular brand initiated by the feature-length films—such as Jiminy Cricket and "When You Wish upon a Star" from *Pinocchio.* "Roy [Disney] had long realized the importance of inter-referential products," writes Bryman, "and the films were very much the centre of that notion."[35] As a major theatrical release, *Song of the South* provided a deep well of recognizable songs and characters that could be endlessly repackaged.

Thanks in no small measure to its strategies of convergence, Disney's overall cultural reputation swung widely over the course of the twentieth century. With it, the critical and commercial perception of its "classic" films also shifted, sometimes in profound ways. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the company was seen as little more than an occasionally innovative, but often struggling, small-time Hollywood studio. Even Mickey Mouse's popularity had largely waned by the end of the 1930s, and only government funds kept the studio afloat during World War II. By the time a generation of Americans raised on all things Disneyland had grown up, however, Disney itself had morphed in the 1970s and 1980s into a sacred American cultural institution on par with Norman Rockwell and baseball. As Michael Real noted in 1977, Disney was not only a company but also a "universe . . . an ideally self-contained illustration of mass-mediated culture."[36] Within this "self-contained" culture, Disney solidified its economic footing and transmedia reach. It also created its own alternate cultural reality: "Popular mass-mediated cultural expressions [like the 'Disney universe'] 'fix' reality both by receiving and transmitting dominant patterns of perception, structures of feeling,

cognitive maps, and cultural norms. They represent the 'central zone' of a cultural system."[37] The company became its own established, self-referential mythology in American culture. Within this environment, it is not hard to see why so many rereleases were suddenly successful. In general, as Ray notes, reissues were a common staple in American theaters at this time—a practice led by, but not limited to, the Disney Corporation.[38] Disney's mass-mediated ubiquity, along with the generally nostalgic and reactionary political climate, lifted all theatrical reissue ships in the proverbial sea.

Many old Disney titles found new (or continued) success throughout the 1960s and 1970s as a result of the company's larger promotional and diversification strategies. *Song of the South* was not the only, or even the most visible, company product within this widespread cultural and industrial shift. *Fantasia*, for instance, underwent a similar transformation. In 1940, the film was a fiasco that almost sunk the studio, an expensive, failed experiment in stereophonic sound that appealed to neither highbrow classical music lovers nor middlebrow cartoon buffs. By the 1990s, *Fantasia* was considered one of Disney's canonical treasures, with "Sorcerer Mickey" one of its most iconic images. In 1971, *Variety* noted that *Pinocchio*, another box office failure from the "classic" period, was enjoying a fourth theatrical reissue that was "substantially ahead of the initial outing [1940] or any one of the previous three reissue trips to market."[39] It remains *Song of the South*, however, that was arguably the biggest benefactor of this Disney universe. Like other films, its commercial and critical fortunes were reversed many decades after its initial release. Unlike those others, however, the film was brought back from the vault after being shelved for an entire decade. Its controversies were completely reframed and even tossed aside by a new generation raised on all things Disney. *Song of the South* went from a film that was widely regarded as offensive in the 1940s to one where even the possibility of its racism is now often questioned.

Song of the South's paratexts in the 1950s and 1960s kept the film "alive" in dispersed forms of nontheatrical circulation. Such ancillary texts continue to exist throughout the Disney media empire to this day (as chapter 5 discusses). They had the specific effect of changing audiences' relationship to *Song of the South* during this period, while also ensuring more receptive conditions for the film's eventual rereleases. Disney and its various intellectual properties remained everywhere, even while the full-length theatrical version was locked away. Such gradual but continuous cultural ubiquity was crucial to developing and solidify-

ing Disney's popular emergence as the standard-bearer for "family enter-tainment" and its socially constructed acceptance as an everyday part of American life. Within this history, intimately tied into the context of a rebranded corporate legacy, *Song of the South* would prove much more resilient. Even though Disney stopped releasing the film between 1956 and 1972, *Song of the South* was never really gone.

Many generations were less dependent on the sporadic rereleases of the film than on the continuous circulation of *Song of the South*–related books and records in the pre–home video, pre-Internet age. Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox, and in particular the story of the "Tar Baby," were fix-tures in children's texts produced by several companies. In the Golden Books, children could read the tales of Brer Rabbit every night. Thanks to Capitol and Disneyland Records, Uncle Remus's voice continued to materialize on numerous records that compiled both his stories and his singing. Likewise, segments of *Song of the South* reappeared on televi-sion on *Disneyland* and, later, *The Wonderful World of Disney*. It may be tempting to think of these pieces of memorabilia as ephemeral or fleet-ing—nostalgic fragments of a past time. But we should not be so quick to dismiss their durability. They remained in circulation for years, passed from friend to friend, family member to family member. Their impact could, and often did, last longer than the "primary" texts they sought to complement and promote. As the *Miami Times* reporter Earl Hutchin-son offered as recently as 2007, "Down through the years [*Song of the South*] spawned a genre of popular kids songs that generations of school children (including this writer) hummed and whistled, and delighted in the antics of folk icons Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and Brer Bear."[40]

By the time *Song of the South* finally reappeared theatrically in 1972, some audiences might not have ever seen the entire film. But many had literally and symbolically grown up with Disney's version of Brer Rabbit and Uncle Remus in their living rooms, bedrooms, classrooms, church youth groups, and so forth. This helped perpetuate the socially constructed perception that *Song of the South* itself had "always" been a part of their lives. Just as important, this ubiquitous transmedia presence eventually altered perceptions of *Song of the South*'s politics, to the point where by the 1980s and 1990s, some even wondered whether the film was ever offensive in the first place.

Accumulatively, this textual ubiquity set different conditions of pos-sibility for audiences during *Song of the South*'s eventual rereleases in the 1970s and 1980s. Disney's strategies of convergence, in a sense, an-ticipated *Song of the South*, rather than the reverse. That is to say, *Song*

of the South as a theatrical text did not so much spawn a diverse multi-media world of records, toys, television shows, books, and so forth; rather, the ubiquity of Disney's transmedia universe spawned recognition and anticipation for the film's eventual theatrical return. People who grew up with Disney's Uncle Remus in their homes were more receptive than 1940s audiences had been to a jarringly inappropriate "Uncle Tom"–ish Southern melodrama in the more racially enlightened era of post–World War II America.

To understand the Uncle Remus film's resurrection, it is important to also understand Disney's. While the film largely disappeared from theaters for nearly three decades, much else changed between 1946 and 1972. It is difficult to pin it down to one particular event that began this shift. Certainly, the advent of *Disneyland*, both television show and theme park, in 1954 and 1955 was central. But Disney had already been working with other companies to circulate content for nearly twenty years by then. Such organizations included the television network ABC, the record company Capitol Records, and the children's books publisher Western Printing. As early as 1930, Disney began licensing its property for merchandise.[41] By the end of that same decade, it was working with hundreds of manufacturers on thousands of different products.[42] Initially, much of this was done for the royalty fees, which kept Disney's costly animation studio running. But the studio also quickly discovered that it was great publicity for the films—in a sense, companies were paying Disney for the right to promote Disney products.

Disney was also succeeding because it discovered that rereleasing its "classics" every few years was a guaranteed moneymaker. Aside from the cost of new advertisements, it was otherwise pure profit. Gene Siskel commented in 1970 that Disney was the one company "that could continue to turn a profit even if it never made another film."[43] Discovering this was as much the result of dire financial straits as creative ambition. Disney found during World War II, when the war effort tied up all its resources, that the only way to make money was to rerelease old films. As Douglas Gomery noted, the 1944 rerelease of *Snow White*, just six years after it first appeared, "accounted for all of Disney's corporate profits outside of government work. . . . It was from the film library that Disney—from this early date—realized additional pure profit."[44] Disney's films, Richard Schickel added more cynically, are "for the most part, endlessly rereleasable."[45] *Disneyland*'s success a decade later, which often benefitted from airing old Disney films on TV for the first time, was just another iteration of this distribution strategy.

My goal in this section is not to reiterate information about Disney's well-known corporate history. Rather, I wish to argue at greater depth for the *cultural impact* of this early transmedia empire. The redistribution and reconstruction of a problematic text such as *Song of the South* serves as a perfect example of the ways the immense Disney universe changed how people interpreted particular titles. By 1968, four years before *Song of the South*'s theatrical return, Schickel noted that Disney was everywhere: "[This year] Walt Disney Productions estimated that around the world 240,000,000 people saw a Disney movie, 100,000,000 watched a Disney television show every week, 800,000,000 read a Disney book or magazine, 50,000,000 listened or danced to Disney music or records, 80,000,000 bought Disney-licensed merchandise, 150,000,000 read a Disney comic strip, 80,000,000 saw Disney educational films at school, in church, on the job, and 6.7 million made the journey to that Mecca in Anaheim [Disneyland]."[46] This was hardly the case during *Song of the South*'s first release. Over the course of three decades, the Walt Disney Company steadily emerged as one of the most powerful media giants in the United States. Disney's strategies of diversification were central to this shift. Much of this information is not particularly novel. Yet those remain staggering numbers, and they served to alter audiences' relationship to everything within the Disney universe, including *Song of the South*.

Nostalgia for Disney begins to play a considerable role here. Disney wasn't successful in the 1950s only because it suddenly flooded ancillary markets with its brand; many people embraced the company's consistent recycling of material in theaters and on television because these media featured content they had not seen since they were themselves children. *Disneyland* was a perfect example. Despite being highly innovative as one new medium (television) and as a blueprint for a new version of still another (theme parks), the ABC program was thoroughly *retro* even then. It offered an intensely nostalgic experience for adults and parents who tuned in each week in record numbers. *Disneyland* became a particularly acute instance of television's early archival function, writes Anderson: "Hollywood's past surfaced in bits and pieces [on the new medium], like fragments of a dream. One of the pleasures of *Disneyland* was the chance it offered to halt the flow of mass culture by remembering relics from the Disney vaults."[47] As with most Disney products by the 1950s, the seeds for a *future* nostalgia were planted in the children who experienced them alongside their sentimental parents. Disney had stumbled on a kind of generational nostalgia—remembered pasts coexisting with

Walt Disney reintroducing his version of Uncle Remus on the premiere episode of ABC's Disneyland *in late 1954.*

anticipated futures. This dynamic worked to create a powerful media influence that retains its grip to this day.

THE EARLY TRANSMEDIA PRESENCE OF *SONG OF THE SOUTH*

For all of *Song of the South*'s problems—both politically and financially—it nonetheless maintained a considerable presence within the Disney universe. Disney was always trying to promote *Song of the South* and incorporate it into other ancillary texts. In 1956, in conjunction with the film's first rerelease, Scotch Tape used Brer Rabbit and other characters from the film as part of its cross-promotion with Disney, which included the grand prize of a trip to Disneyland in Anaheim. Yet by then the film's reuse was already widespread. A decade earlier, Disney had begun producing a weekly series of "Uncle Remus" comic strips, which ran from 1945 to the mid-1970s.[48] As early as 1948, Donald Duck sang "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" in the opening moments of the short subject film *Soup's On*. "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" was also featured in the title sequence of NBC's *The Wonderful World of Disney*, the 1960s iteration of *Disneyland*. The song itself features a long history of individual exploitation, to which I will return at length in the fifth chapter.

As I mentioned earlier, three key players in Disney's diversification strategies were Western, Capitol Records, and ABC. In this section, I wish to look closer at these three alliances not because they are unique, but rather because they are powerfully representative of Disney's extended media reach from the 1940s to the 1960s. Moreover, *Song of the South* maintained a strong presence in each. As early as 1933, Disney and Western began talks for a Mickey Mouse book.[49] By 1944 they had begun working together on the "Golden Books," a children-oriented line of products originally commissioned by the publisher, Simon and Schuster, which Western printed. Together they produced *Through the Picture Frame*—the first of many collaborative Golden efforts.[50] Meanwhile, Capitol Records, founded by Johnny Mercer in the early 1940s, within the decade was also doing business with the Disney company. Finally, by 1954, Disney entered into an agreement with ABC to broadcast *Disneyland*—a recycling of old material from the Disney vault that was also intended to promote and pay for the park itself.

Disneyland prominently featured *Song of the South*. Chapter 5 looks more closely at the film's relationship to the physical theme park, but here I am primarily examining the television show. Collectively, the *Disneyland* project proved the single most important event in the history of the company. In addition to the theme park and hit TV show,

The first episode of Disneyland *featured a substantial excerpt from* Song of the South, *yet only a brief introductory clip of Uncle Remus and the children.*

Most of the Song of the South *footage shown on the premiere episode was from the "Laughing Place" animated sequence.*

Disneyland helped launch other hit properties such as *Davy Crockett, Zorro,* and *The Mickey Mouse Club.* The program was also key in promoting Disney's theatrical films, such as when it dedicated a whole hour to promoting the hugely successful *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954). Yet, as with its work during World War II, the business decision to collaborate with ABC was a practical one largely motivated by desperation. While Disney was still creatively ambitious, the days of major cinematic experimentation in sound and animation, such as in a film like *Fantasia*, were gone. By this point, almost everything the company did involved more cost-conscious projects, such as live action. Disney needed the money from a major network to offset the costs of building the park. Meanwhile, the struggling television channel matched such desperation. "The third place network [ABC]," Anderson writes, "gambled on Disney by committing $2 million for a fifty-two-week series (with a seven-year renewal option) and by purchasing a 35 percent share in the park for $500,000." [51] Many saw the building of Disneyland and the accompanying television program as a foolish financial endeavor. Yet ABC emerged with two huge hits (*Disneyland* and *The Mickey Mouse Club*). Disney, meanwhile, became the first Hollywood studio to become keenly aware of television's ability to market films and to recirculate existing material. "[Walt] Disney was the first Hollywood executive during the 1950s," writes Anderson, "to envision a future built on television's

technical achievements—the scope of its signal, the access it provided to the American home."[52] As many scholars have noted, it is impossible to overstate the importance of this period in the company's shift from a minor niche studio to a major multimedia corporation.

At the heart of *Disneyland*'s carefully crafted recycling and diversification practices rested *Song of the South*. It appeared on *Disneyland* at least seven separate times (including reruns) in the first two seasons of its broadcast. Notably, the "Laughing Place" sequence was one of the clips that Disney reused during the premiere episode on October 27, 1954. Featuring only a brief introductory moment with Uncle Remus and the children and then a whole Brer Rabbit animated sequence, this footage from *Song of the South* appeared along with excerpts from *True-Life Adventures* (1948), *Fantasia*, *Lonesome Ghosts* (1937), and a preview of *Davy Crockett* (1954). On February 16 the following year, a sequence from the film appeared along with scenes from *Three Little Pigs* (1933) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). The episode, titled "A Cavalcade of Songs," was dedicated to—as Walt says in the introduction—explaining "where we get the songs for our pictures, how we decide what songs we want to use, and how we go about working them into our stories."[53]

More significantly, *Song of the South* reappeared on *Disneyland* in an episode titled "A Tribute to Joel Chandler Harris."[54] First broadcast on January 18, 1956, this was a full hour dedicated to promoting *Song of the South*'s upcoming theatrical rerelease that year. This episode was again rebroadcast on both March 28 and June 27 during the show's second season. Like many *Disneyland* episodes, "A Tribute to Joel Chandler Harris" was theatrical advertising masked as both informative education and television entertainment. "Nearly one-third of each *Disneyland* episode was devoted entirely to studio promotion . . . ," writes Anderson, and "capitalized on the unspoken recognition that commercial advertising had made it impossible to distinguish between entertainment and advertising."[55] What was particularly effective was that such promotional strategies always coexisted with a pseudo-intellectual demeanor that infused all the material with a perceived historical and educational value. This was perhaps never truer than with "A Tribute to Joel Chandler Harris." Beginning most episodes in a soundstage library or office, surrounded by papers and books, Anderson notes, Walt Disney "appeared professorial. Inspired by knowledge, yet free from scholastic pretension, he is television's image of an intellectual, kindly and inviting. . . . This lecture seems motivated only by Disney's inquisitive character until the Disney sales pitch gradually seeps in."[56] While the performance of middle-class

intellectualism was often about reverence for Disney's own (and Hollywood's) cinematic past, it was not exclusively so.

As its title implies, "A Tribute to Joel Chandler Harris" was packaged as a loving memorial to the American South's literary heritage. Beneath the surface, though, it was primarily a quick recycling of some *Song of the South* footage, and a transparent promotion for the impending theatrical reissue. Besides footage of the "Tar Baby" sequence (and Walt's introduction), the show created a whole live action dramatization to accompany it. "A Tribute to Joel Chandler Harris" reenacted the life of a young Harris (played by David Stollery) as he learns to be a printer and then writer. Along the way, he encounters a "servant," Herbert (Sam McDaniel), who first tells him the parables he himself originally heard long ago from an unseen "Uncle Remus." McDaniel, interestingly, was the older brother of the more famous Hattie, who appeared in *Song of the South*. Most of the episode is about Harris growing up and learning his profession from editors and printers, not listening to stories from slaves. In addition to the one animated Brer Rabbit scene, some of the slave and plantation footage is also recycled from *Song of the South*. These are intercut with new scenes featuring Stollery, McDaniel, and others, which were shot just for this episode.

"A Tribute to Joel Chandler Harris" both repackaged and reframed the historical context for *Song of the South*. *Disneyland* saved the "Tar Baby" sequence until the end of the broadcast to fully recontextualize the film as a small part of American literary heritage. Walt himself introduces the footage as a preservation of Harris's legacy, to be "loved by children of all ages and of all races." Saving the *Song of the South* footage until the end also forced audiences to sit through the whole program until getting to the prime theatrical content. Overall, the episode is largely a new expansion of *Song of the South*. It is one of the only true instances of "transmedia storytelling" in the film's history of circulation. Disney explicitly expanded the narrative canvas of the film to include the story of Harris himself. While historically inaccurate, the narrative allowed Disney to sell *Song of the South* as a product of literary heritage. It also explicitly rewrote the film's narrative conceit—a happy black servant recounting the stories of Brer Rabbit to a white child—as an assumed historical reality rather than as a figment of Disney's imagination. Beyond just promoting the film, "A Tribute to Joel Chandler Harris" explicitly reframed *Song of the South* as the way history was, even though little evidence shows that white children in the Old South were allowed to spend extensive time

with black slaves. It also obscures the historical fact that Harris himself really learned the Brer Rabbit stories as a journalist later in life.

Disneyland's strategic reuse of *Song of the South* in this episode both historicized the film's origins and minimized Uncle Remus himself. It was also a small part of the larger trend in the early days of television to sidestep the racial problems the medium often inherited from the recycling of film. In *Genre and Television*, Jason Mittell discusses the careful ways in which networks came to recycle older theatrical cartoons in the early days of television. A whole range of classic cartoons were edited, or censored entirely, based on offensive images of violence, racism, smoking, and so forth. The result was excessively generic programming: "While not implying that the changing or censoring of racist or other images was inappropriate, it is important to note the cultural effects of such practices. By eliminating references to blacks and other nonwhite human characters out of fear of complaints of racism, television programmers essentially created a white-only genre of programming. This policy was consistent with network live-action practices of the 1950s and 1960s—both to avoid accusations of racist representations and to placate racist viewers who did not want to see 'positive' images of blacks, television presented mostly white characters."[57] Mittell argues that, by default, early television programming reinforced a mediated landscape of whiteness, where all other races and ethnicities disappeared. The contradictory protests to *Beulah, Amos 'n' Andy,* and *The Nat King Cole Show* also reinforced this. Moreover, I would argue that network television's decision to censor the most overtly offensive shorts might have created the impression that racism, and even the idea of racial difference, did not exist. This in turn made it increasingly likely that future generations would see less of what was offensive in *Song of the South* when it again reappeared in theaters. As the film moved into newer media platforms, the early television history of *Song of the South* provided an excellent example of how the Disney universe both promoted and concealed, both expanded and dissipated, the text's problematic past.

While *Disneyland* was a powerful tool in keeping *Song of the South* alive, Brer Rabbit–themed records and children's books would prove far more durable. Smith has noted the "largely unrecognized importance of the phonograph in children's media culture."[58] Disney did not so much pioneer this ancillary market as maximize it in relation to recycling theatrical properties. One such early collaborator with Disney was the popular big band musician Johnny Mercer's Capitol Records. In 1947 Capi-

tol released *The Tales of Uncle Remus for Children (from Walt Disney's "Song of the South")*, a three-record collection of stories and songs from the film. The album included both voice performers from the movie and re-recordings of the soundtrack by Mercer and his orchestra. Also that year, Mercer released a single of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," while the famed band leader Billy Butterfield produced another 45rpm with one of *Song of the South*'s lesser-known tunes, "Sooner or Later." *The Tales of Uncle Remus for Children* proved so popular that it was rereleased with different packaging in 1948 and 1949. Starting in 1952, meanwhile, Capitol began releasing that same record compilation divided up as three separate packages: *Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby, Brer Rabbit's Laughing Place*, and *Brer Rabbit Runs Away*. Finally, in 1962 and again in 1975, Capitol went back to releasing modified versions of the original three-record set.

By the 1950s, meanwhile, Disney began distributing audio versions of *Song of the South* through its own record label, Disneyland and later Buena Vista Records, beginning with *Uncle Remus* (1955). Disneyland Records came about after Disney had a fallout with Capitol over the wildly popular song "The Ballad of Davy Crockett," rightly realizing that it could pocket more money by producing the records themselves. Some of Disneyland's early versions of *Song of the South* tunes, meanwhile, actually appeared in conjunction with Disney's other popular television show, *The Mickey Mouse Club*. During the 1950s and 1960s, several noted celebrities, such as *Mickey Mouse Club* leader Jimmy Dodd, Cliff Edwards (the voice of *Pinocchio*'s Jiminy Cricket), and the teen idol Bobby Sox, each released 45rpm singles that covered *Song of the South* songs. Meanwhile, the musician Mike Curb and famous trumpeter Louis Armstrong produced singles that were released through the late '60s and early '70s through Buena Vista. During this time, Disneyland Records was also producing read-along records, such as *Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby* in 1974. By the late '70s, Disney was also producing both audiocassette versions and Super 8mm film copies of the "Tar Baby" sequence from *Song of the South*, which, in addition to private homes, played in the same schools, churches, and other community centers which for years had distributed the Brer Rabbit books.

Between the time of the film's second and third releases, Disney's recirculation of *Song of the South* stories and characters through children's literature was even more considerable. In 1946, Disney first commissioned Grosset and Dunlap to produce adaptations of Joel Chandler

Song of the South

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Featuring THE ACADEMY AWARD WINNER "ZIP-A-DEE-DOO-DAH" with all the happy songs and the musical score from the Walt Disney classic motion picture SONG OF THE SOUTH

STORYTELLER ST-3907

A DISNEYLAND RECORD AND BOOK   LLP-363

WALT DISNEY Presents THE STORY OF
BRER RABBIT and the Tar Baby

SEE the pictures HEAR the record READ the book

LLP-363
BRER RABBIT and the TAR BABY
LLP-363 7" 33⅓ RPM
Suggested retail $.98

A 7" LP record with the story of "BRER RABBIT and the TAR BABY," and the Academy Award winning song "ZIP-A-DEE-DOO-DAH," plus a 24 page full color illustrated book.

MR. EXHIBITOR: You can obtain these records at REDUCED RATES FOR PROMOTIONAL PURPOSES. For information, contact your local Disneyland/Vista Distributor or: Disneyland/Vista Records, 800 Sonora Avenue, Glendale, California 91201.

All the Songs from WALT DISNEY'S
Uncle Remus

Music from the Original Sound Track of Song of the South

DQ-1205

All the Songs from
WALT DISNEY'S
UNCLE REMUS
DQ-1205 12" 33⅓ RPM
Suggested retail $1.98

Music from the Original Sound Track of "SONG OF THE SOUTH" DQ-1205

Side One	Side Two
Song of the South	How Do You Do
Uncle Remus	Sooner or Later
Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah	Everybody Has A Laughing Place
Who Wants To Live Like That	All I Want
Let The Rain Pour Down	Finale

Disney promotional material. During Song of the South's *1972 rerelease, Disney encouraged theater owners to display Brer Rabbit–related Disneyland records in lobbies, and to play them over the speakers inside and outside the auditorium.*
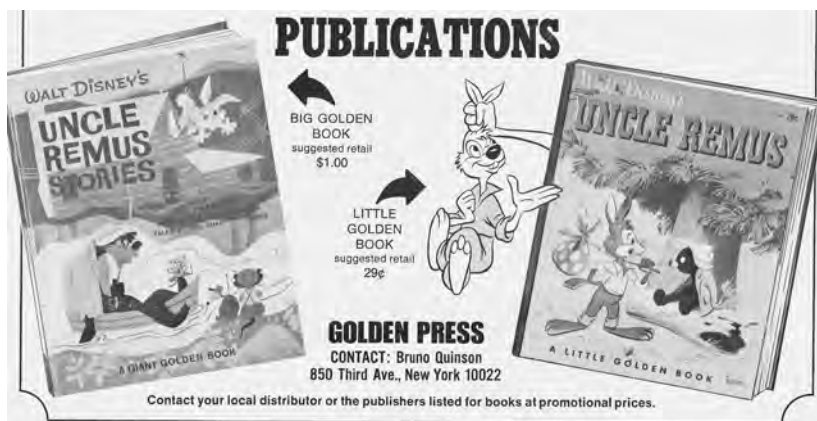
Disney also encouraged theater owners to display copies of Golden Books, and to coordinate cross-promotional reading campaigns with schools and the local library.

Harris's Brer Rabbit stories that featured Disney's animation. These included *The Wonderful Tar Baby* and *Brer Rabbit Rides the Fox*. From then on, between Western Printing in 1947 and Random House in 1973, Disney directly or indirectly supervised more than a dozen literary versions of *Song of the South*. Disney's primary collaborator was Western Printing in Racine, Wisconsin; almost all the Brer Rabbit books, regardless of which publishing house commissioned them, were produced by Western's printing factory, which had a virtual monopoly on the market.

While less celebrated than the partnership with ABC, Disney's relationship with Western was nearly as strong. A cornerstone of *Song of the South*'s cultural legacy, Golden Books began producing children's material in 1942 based on fairy tales such as the Mother Goose stories. The publishing house Simon and Schuster owned the series; the books were printed by Western, which had already produced the *Mickey Mouse Magazine* for Disney a decade earlier. The Wisconsin-based printing company was also a substantial investor in Disneyland, purchasing a nearly 14 percent stake in the new park at a time when most were convinced it would fail.[59] This investment was second to only ABC. Not surprisingly, Western was also committed to promoting Disneyland, producing a series of books related to the park and show, including highly successful publications that anticipated and built off the *Davy Crockett* phenomenon. An entire generation of baby boomers grew up obsessed with coonskin caps and singing "The Ballad of Davy Crockett."[60] Dis-

ney, meanwhile, returned the favor by featuring a bookstore inside Disneyland that exclusively sold products from Western, Simon and Schuster, and another Western collaborator, Dell.[61]

In the long run, this partnership would also be key to Disney's cultural impact, and to *Song of the South*'s unexpected longevity. As early as two years after Golden Books began publishing, they were already collaborating with Disney to print books featuring its cartoon characters. In 1947, Golden began publishing *Song of the South*–licensed children's books, beginning with *Walt Disney's Uncle Remus Stories* (1947), a collection of twenty-three Harris stories drawn by Golden artists. This particular book was republished several times with different covers and different drawings until at least 1956. Another version of this book, *Uncle Remus Brer Rabbit Stories*, was reprinted in 1977. Meanwhile, Golden also produced a shorter, "Little Golden Book" version, simply titled *Walt Disney's Uncle Remus* (1947), which was republished in 1956 and again as late as 1971. Importantly, too, many Golden Books by the 1950s were accompanied by records that featured both songs from the movie and "Uncle Remus" reading his stories aloud. Disney also produced similar read-along books through Random House in the 1970s. In 1951 and 1955, Golden included a 78rpm record with an adaptation of *Song of the South*'s "Laughing Place" sequence—a collection that was also released in the 1960s with the actor Art Carney doing Remus's voice.

A NEW GENERATION RAISED ON DISNEY'S BRER RABBIT

These different paratexts accumulatively shifted audiences' personal connection with, and eventually Disney's own economic relationship to, the original Brer Rabbit stories. These books and records were all titled "Walt Disney's" stories of Brer Rabbit. And by the 1970s, they were remembered as being Disney's own stories instead of Joel Chandler Harris's. As the *Washington Post* columnist Judith Martin noted in a Disney retrospective in 1973, "Disneyism has made a contribution to children's literature—half a dozen characters and a bright way of looking at nature—that has eclipsed (or absorbed, by using classics as Disney material) just about everything done up to that point. Before Disney what you remembered about children's literature was mostly literary, not visual."[62] Children growing up in the United States after the 1950s who remembered reading the Brer Rabbit stories were, knowingly

Pretty soon he saw the tar baby and said, "How do you do?" But the tar baby said nothing.

9
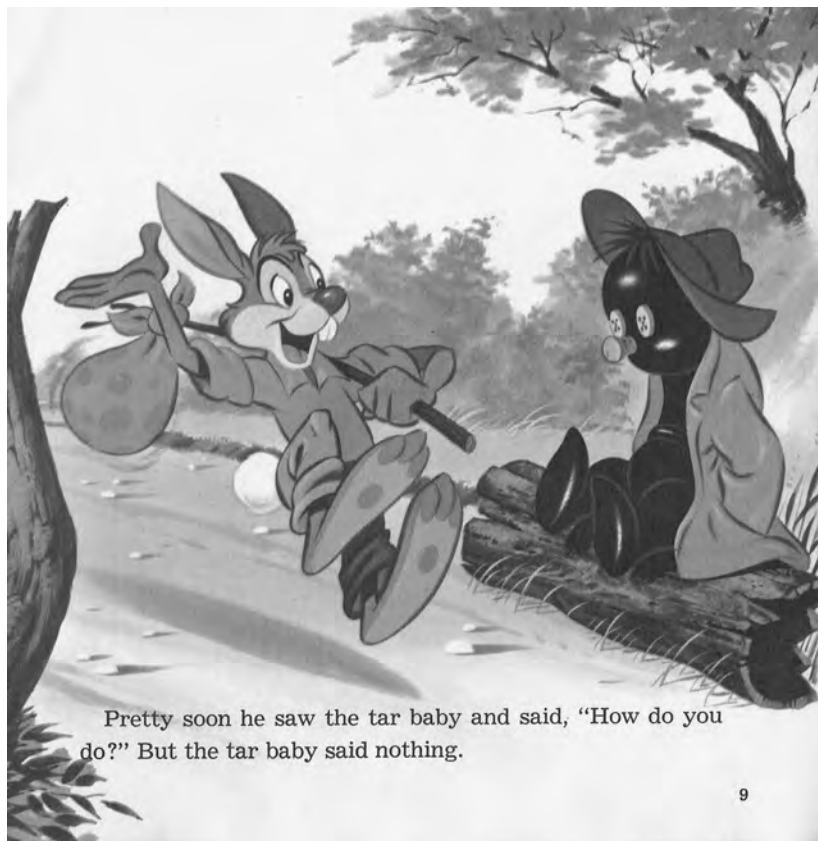
Fans often remember Disney's literary version of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby *as fondly remembered as* Song of the South *itself.*

or not, just as likely to be recalling Disney's literary repurposing of the material as the originals. They remembered the Disney adaptations of the original stories, illustrated by Disney animators and often not even including Uncle Remus or his frame narrative. These were more visually and literately accessible for young readers—more picture book than novel. People who grew up reading the Disney version in the 1950s and 1960s were therefore primed to accept the theatrical rereleases of *Song of the South* in the 1970s and 1980s.

Disney at first failed to create a successful film based on the Brer Rabbit stories. Yet the company soon after succeeded in creating a *generation* raised on its version of the tales. One person, writing an online review of *Walt Disney's Brer Rabbit and His Friends* (1974) in 1999, insisted that

the book was "an absolute favorite of my child and me," adding, "We were so excited when *Song of the South* came out. We saw it 12 times."[63] That demand for *Song of the South*, in retrospect, was often less rooted in memories of actually watching the full-length film in theaters. As one person wrote on Amazon's *Song of the South* page in 2001, "I too grew up singing Zip-a-Dee-Do-Dah, but I learned it from a book and tape set, not the movie, as I suspect 85% of the people on this forum have. . . . The movie itself is not all fun and animation, so those of you out there reading up on Brer rabbit, brer bear and brer fox, you're only getting 1/3 the story of *Song of the South*. The bulk of the movie is a dry back story in which small snippets of animated morays are inserted."[64] This commenter pointed out that one's attachment to *Song of the South* was perhaps rooted more in childhood memories of ancillary texts. People were not familiar with the film itself but with the "Tar Baby" children stories, or the film clips on Super 8mm and *Disneyland* broadcasts, or Uncle Remus's voice on records or audiocassettes. At the very least, these other texts were as important culturally as *Song of the South*, and more widespread in their circulation. In either case, they too helped build demand for the film.

On Internet forums today, many people recall the books and other versions of *Song of the South* alongside, and even in excess of, the movie itself. "I saw *Song of the South* as a little kid when it first came out in 1946," wrote one commenter on Amazon. "I grew up on the songs, comic books, newspaper comics, Golden Books, etc., that featured Brer Rabbit and the other characters. And I got to see the film at least once more, in its 1980–81 release."[65] Though the person claims to remember seeing *Song of the South* in 1946, it is telling that he or she "grew up" on the plethora of the ancillary material. Another man claimed that his wife "has never seen this movie, but has read the story (from an old 'Golden Books') and saw some of the Brer Rabbit cartoons on 'Wonderful World of Disney.'"[66] Reviewing the Disney's *Sing Along Songs: Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah* VHS (released in 1986), one person wrote, "I, too, am a fan of *Song of the South*, both the Disney book and movie. I loved reading them aloud when I was a child and later as an adult."[67] Meanwhile, one commenter on a Disneyland Records fan blog wrote, "I had this one [*Walt Disney Presents the Story of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby*] as a kid! Such great memories."[68] Another wrote about the same read-along book and record on weRead, "[My] All Time Favorite would love to find a copy."[69] As seen in these online reviews, memories of the books and other materials define many people's memories of *Song of the South* today.

Moreover, fans of the movie and the books often relate the memories back to their own families. As *Song of the South* endured past initially harsh criticism, it eventually developed a strong role in generational nostalgia. "As a child this storybook was my absolute favorite," wrote one fan on Amazon. "Memories of my grandmother reading these stories and sharing the lessons they taught are priceless."[70] Another echoed, "This is a book that I hope to pass down through generations of my family, just as my grandfather passed it on to me."[71] The act of one family member reading the story to another is often a part of this memory: "I got this book sometime when I was very young, around 1977 I believe, and I can remember my mother reading it to me. On page 11 there is a picture of 'de Tar-Baby' that used to scare the stuffing out of me! I recently found this book in an old box in a closet and when I opened it up, the piece of paper that I used to keep over that picture was still there."[72] Many people hold onto memories and onto the book itself because they wish to share the experience with the next generation in their family. At the same time, we should remain mindful that such generational patterns were, and remain, central to Disney's marketing strategy of building long-term brand loyalty with consumers. What was perhaps more incidental was how this generational pattern ultimately strengthened Disney's confidence in rereleasing *Song of the South*.

Generational nostalgia is always more about the parent, and adults more generally, than about the child. The same person above, who remembered her mother reading it, has "tried to read these stories to my daughter, but I do not have the gift of the language like my mother used to have."[73] Older family members buy it for younger ones, hoping that the nostalgia will be passed on. "This book will be a great Christmas surprise for my nephew who use [*sic*] to listen to me read it to him when he was real young," one person wrote on Amazon. "My nephew seems to bring this book up to me quite often reminising [*sic*] the memories of how enjoyable it was to hear the Tar Baby Story."[74] More brazenly, one consumer hoped to pass it on to their children's children: "The Brer Rabbit book was a childhood favorite of my 30 year old son. I wanted one for his children to enjoy."[75] Like discussions about the movie itself, people's memories of other Disney Brer Rabbit merchandise are focused on the child via an adult—and on the nostalgia imposed on that child before they are old enough to develop their own memories.

All this in turn leaves open the question of how many people actually remember seeing *Song of the South*, since more people recall Brer

Rabbit, the "Tar Baby," and "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" than Johnny, Uncle Remus, or Ginny. The same cynical commenter above, who thought "85%" of the people were remembering the book and not the film, also hypothesized, "While the movie is okay, it isn't the blockbuster most people draw it out to be. The acting is mostly subpar and the animation isn't much better. I question whether most people who purport seeing the movie actually have seen it, and if they have REAL memories of it or imagined ones."[76] To a point, there doesn't appear to be a meaningful difference for many fans of *Song of the South* between the real memories or the imagined ones, or between the movie or the books, since it is all bound up in a deep affective attachment to the larger transmedia legacy of Disney's film. Nostalgia is by definition dependent on a simplified and illusory view of the past, where the boundaries between real and imagined quickly dissolve. The lack of a clear distinction reinforces the point I have been emphasizing throughout the chapter. The most meaningful cultural reception of *Song of the South* as a historical event began not with full-length theatrical film appearances in 1946 or 1956, but rather with its paratextual presence during the 1950s and 1960s. The Disney executive Irving Ludwig speculated in 1972 that one major factor in *Song of the South*'s sudden success were "the large numbers of teenagers who were seeing it for the first time."[77] These were people with little sense of the racial climate after a war that ended before they were born. Instead, their only point of reference decades later was the Disney universe in general, and Golden Books in particular. They were thus more receptive to the film than the previous generation had been. The cult legacy of *Song of the South* began with memories of singing with records, reading along with family members, and other (perhaps misremembered) transmedia fragments of and from childhood. In that environment, *Song of the South* was destined to finally, if briefly, succeed.

EMERGING CULTURAL AND CRITICAL PRESTIGE

There were other adults, not just sentimental parents, who turned warmly to Disney by the time *Song of the South* returned to theaters in 1972. Despite Schickel's notoriously harsh, but fair, critique in 1968, the larger critical trend toward Disney at this point was not condemnation, but reverence. Not since the 1930s had critics so warmly

embraced Disney. In the intervening sixteen years between *Song of the South*'s second and third theatrical releases, Disney was repositioned as an American institution. While *Song of the South* was not a catalyst in that shift, it was clearly a beneficiary. Tribute works such as Christopher Finch's *The Art of Walt Disney* (1973) and Leonard Maltin's *The Disney Films* (1973) began dotting the landscape of American coffee tables. Also that year, Judith Martin wrote a similarly loving retrospective of Disney's entire history in the *Washington Post*, titled "The Wonderful, Lovable, Universal, Wholesome World of Walt Disney." The particular occasion for Martin's extensive piece, appropriately, was a Disney retrospective film series at New York City's Lincoln Center.

All these broad critical reappraisals were written by younger genera- tions who were raised on Disney products and who unabashedly wal- lowed in their own nostalgia. Accumulatively, they also worked to so- lidify the "great man" myth of Walt himself, the legacy of the company as cultural institution, and the Disney corporate brand as wholesome family entertainment. Critics who grew up on Disney had a very differ- ent relationship with the product than did people like Bosley Crowther three decades earlier. Commenting on that same 1973 Disney retrospec- tive at Lincoln Center, Martin added that "probably no one who attends the month-long Disney film festival now going on in Lincoln Center in New York will be coming to the material fresh. There will be those [adult critics and moviegoers] revisiting the half-remembered scares and laughs of their childhood."[78] According to the *Wall Street Journal* re- porter Joy Gould Boyum, who was also covering the event, *Song of the South* was shown there as part of an afternoon double bill with *Alice in Wonderland*. During the screening, she reported that "the children in the audience were heavily outnumbered by the adults, many of whom sat there without even a tiny companion to explain their presence." Boyum speculated that while many of the adults might simply have been critics interested in Disney's artistic and historical achievements, "a good many more were there, not in the service of art or craft, but in an unashamed attempt to recapture childhood."[79]

Song of the South achieved greater success in the 1970s and 1980s be- cause the real or imagined childhood nostalgia of people who grew up with Disney needed to be in place. The response of adults to *Song of the South*, as Boyum described it, was the exact opposite of what it had been in the 1940s. Instead of being bored by the inferior aesthetic object, the adults seemed more into *Song of the South* than were the children, who

"squirmed in their seats, talked among themselves, hardly a one of them either laughing or cheering or gasping audibly."[80] She believed that the indifference of these children was due ironically to being a generation raised on television. The result was a different cultural and stylistic sensibility that caused older Disney films to seem slow and boring. Boyum ended with the following anecdote about an actual child's response to *Song of the South* in 1973: "A possible case in point is the response of a small boy seated behind me to what was clearly intended as a deeply touching moment in '*Song of the South.*' [When Johnny chases after Uncle Remus late in the film, he cuts through a fenced-off field and is stampeded by a roaming bull. . . . The moment] inspired from the child not a cry of fright nor a tear of concern, but a question: 'Hey Mommy, do you think they are going to sue?'"[81]

Uninfluenced by nostalgia or the desire to hold onto childhood, kids at the Disney retrospective watched *Song of the South* with passing indifference. In 1972, the scholar Frank McConnell took his four-year old son to see *Song of the South* as well and was intrigued by his reaction: he was frightened by Brer Fox, but otherwise he found the film, especially the live action, un-engaging.[82] Many young children in the 1970s did not see the film with the same weight of memories or immersion in the Disney universe. Thus these factors did not necessarily affect their reception of the film. They simply saw the same awkward, even boring, Hollywood melodrama that film critics had dismissed in the 1940s. Meanwhile, adult critics sat there much more engaged. They remembered the experience of watching *Song of the South* as a child, or reading about Brer Rabbit and the "Tar Baby," or perhaps watching "A Tribute to Joel Chandler Harris" on ABC with their own nostalgic parents.

After the 1960s, many audiences would go to see *Song of the South*, sit in darkened theaters, and watch their own childhood memories as much as the film itself. The controversies of the 1940s were long gone, perhaps even nonexistent to them. The white backlash, Disney's revival as an American institution, *Song of the South*'s ubiquity in the transmediated Disney universe, and the emergent power of nostalgia among parents and critics for these childhood texts, all accumulatively worked to help Uncle Remus and little Johnny find sustained box office success. Given this context, it is not difficult to see how *Song of the South* had shifted from a culturally and critically panned company eyesore in 1946, to the "most requested" title in the Disney vault. By the 1970s, *Song of the South* was now itself officially a cultural institution for many audiences.

"OUR MOST REQUESTED MOVIE"

As the civil rights movement waned by the end of the 1960s, Disney proceeded cautiously with the idea of finally rereleasing *Song of the South*. "As recently as 18 months ago," the *Chicago Tribune* film critic Gene Siskel wrote in 1972, "Walt Disney Productions said it would not release *Song of the South* in 'the foreseeable future' because it anticipated 'negative community reaction.'"[83] Disney's reasons for withholding *Song of the South* were made more explicit in *Variety,* which published an otherwise-minor article in 1970 stating that the company had long since decided that the film was too insensitive. As a self-fashioned family-friendly corporation, Disney was more image-conscious than most. The reporter, Ron Wise, speculated that Disney was particularly sensitive about *Song of the South* because African Americans were "disproportionately large in percentage as dependable adult box office support."[84]

The article's genesis began when an independent theater owner put in a request to Disney to obtain a copy of the film for a one-time screening. He was told, however, that "the company had no intention of rereleasing it because of the racial angle." Wise concurred, and stated that "there is simply no editing out the racial condescension of that day in which it was created." But the theater owner believed the film should be rereleased because of its entertainment and historical value; he wrote back to Disney, "I can appreciate your concern for the image of the Disney corporation, but I think you are doing a disservice to the film-going public by withholding" *Song of the South,* which he believed "must be considered a classic."[85]

In the early 1970s, Disney and its surrogates publicly promoted the film's real and imagined popularity in the face of controversy. That the theater owner assumed the film should be regarded as a "classic" was clearly the product of Disney's inter-referential universe. The *Variety* article was in part a trial balloon to gauge reactions to the possibility of rereleasing it. According to the Disney publicist Tom Jones in 1972, *Song of the South*—despite never having been a significant box office hit—was "our most requested movie by mail."[86] By the time of its return, the film was now regarded in the popular press as "one of Disney's most popular."[87] Meanwhile, Siskel reiterated its intense demand as the company's "most requested" title[88] in a *Chicago Tribune* review where he also claimed to have been the one who successfully talked Disney President E. Cardon Walker into rereleasing the film. While such lofty praise in

defense of *Song of the South* could easily be written off as the result of a deceptive promotional campaign, the film's extremely lucrative third release seems to confirm the assessment that it *was* one of Disney's most requested titles.

Given all the factors I've discussed, the Disney company believed that it was worth the gamble to finally rerelease *Song of the South*. At the same time, Disney also later tried to deny that it had ever pulled the film permanently. In 1972, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that a "Disney publicity director said the film has never been shelved and is being released again because of fan letters requesting it."[89] *Variety* likewise reported in January of that same year that the film simply "skipped a reissue cycle" in the early 1960s.[90] There appears to have been an uneven balance in the company's negotiation between acknowledging the controversy and not fully closing off the possibility of eventually cashing in on its demand.

Meanwhile, the film was less criticized in the 1970s because many prospective cultural critics did not take it seriously enough. *Song of the South* was at that point little more than a passing nostalgic fancy that was soon to fade, another racist text from a Hollywood past littered with racist texts. But as the film endured through a new decade and two more successful reissues, a great deal of the old criticism would return. The next chapter will more closely explore *Song of the South*'s renewed criticism through both satire (1974's *Coonskin*) and print in the wake of Ronald Reagan's election as U.S. president in 1980. Such critiques, however, would be met by a more hardened group of supporters. Unlike in 1946, *Song of the South* benefited from a generation raised in the Disney universe, who now saw the old Uncle Remus film as sacred. Eventually, Disney would once again see *Song of the South* as too much trouble, and finally put the film back in the vault—so far for good. Yet even then, Disney wouldn't remove the film without continuing to exploit what little value it still possessed, most notably "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah."

Four   A PAST THAT NEVER EXISTED

Coonskin, *Post-racial Whiteness, and
Rewriting History in the Era of Reaganism*

*How can anyone be so racial in his judgment of a Dis-
ney Movie that is pure fantasy and entertainment? The
"Uncle Remus" stories are a part of black heritage as
much as slavery and the Civil War. The stories were told
to black children as well as white as a means to alleviate
the burden of everyday life. In* Song of the South *the
black people show a magic and a love for survival that
whites envy. Uncle Remus is an all-knowing, magic man.
Is there a problem with his being black?*
MARY COATES, LETTER TO THE
LOS ANGELES TIMES, JANUARY 10, 1981

*We're going back to the '50s [with the election of Ronald
Reagan], this person said, and it will be great.*
HAYNES JOHNSON

Song of the South found a second life after a long theatri-
cal disappearance in the late 1950s and throughout the subsequent de-
cade. By 1972, the film reappeared, this time to the kind of success that
would continue for the next fifteen years. Despite being the last decade
in which it appeared legally, *Song of the South*'s theatrical fortunes in
the 1980s were undeniable—in fact, it was the only decade in which the
film was rereleased twice. The relatively modest six-year span between
appearances (1980 and 1986) easily marked the briefest hiatus in the
film's distribution history. The critical reconstruction of Disney's legacy,
and of *Song of the South*, were central factors in its prolonged resurgence
thirty years after it was first made. By the mid-1980s, the Disney company
itself was now at the dawn of another golden age under the guidance of

Michael Eisner, Frank Wells, and Jeffrey Katzenberg. *Song of the South*, like many "classic" Disney titles, was both a contributor to and benefactor of this environment. Disney's corporate resurgence will be a central focus of the next chapter; other historical issues, as this chapter shows, also played a part in the film's success.

Song of the South's consistent appeal in the 1980s spoke to, and reflected, the generally regressive political climate of the time. In the anti–civil rights era of racially conservative Reaganism, *Song of the South*'s perceived innocence and nonconfrontational style found renewed popularity with audiences looking for nostalgic films that offered utopian representations of race relations yet paradoxically denied any meaningful racial difference. Shorthand for a wide range of reactionary domestic and international policies, Reaganism also denoted regressive attitudes regarding race in the United States. In *Watching Race*, Herman Gray has argued that "race operated at the center of conservative Republican political discourse as the often unnamed sign of erosion, menace, threat, and permissiveness—(black) welfare cheats, the (liberal) welfare state (and its largely minority dependents), (black and latino) teenage pregnancy, rising crime (committed largely by black and latino urban male youth)."[1] The term evokes what in theory was a self-identified color-blind logic, which explicitly denied racial difference but which was deeply racist at its unspoken core. In practice, Reaganism's proponents demonized minorities for political gain through carefully coded language that avoided direct references to race. Yet the terms (e.g., "welfare cheats") resonated with white voters frustrated by African American political gains. Thus discourses of Reaganism by default worked in support of policies that reinforced white privilege, such as cutting funding for public education and social programs. On a deeper level, they worked to restore the pre–civil rights status quo where African Americans were politically disenfranchised.

The contradictory cultural logic of a nostalgic color blindness that masked a deeper structure of racial inequality was a perfect match with Disney's aged, but never more popular, *Song of the South*. Supporters appealed to the positive personal relationship between Johnny and Uncle Remus and to its narrative indifference to any direct acknowledgment of race. Yet this in no way remedied the film's deeper mythology of troubling racial hierarchies. *Song of the South* envisioned a fantasy world wherein blacks returned to their subservient positions on the plantation. It offered a reassuring image for whites of (pre–civil rights) African Americans who had no need for equality or political agency. Thus critics

of *Song of the South* in the 1980s were particularly frustrated by its symbolic relationship to the new U.S. conservatism. Its expanding and vocal groups of defenders were increasingly enabled by both Disney's reactionary corporate appeal and the restorative nostalgia of the era's racially regressive political climate.

Song of the South garnered significant opposition from many directions at the time, not just the progressive critiques after the election of Reagan in 1980. Most notable was Ralph Bakshi's hybrid animation satire *Coonskin* (1974), which was made in the aftermath of *Song of the South's* reappearance in 1972. More than anything else that decade, *Coonskin's* very existence spoke volumes about the continuing presence of Disney's anachronistic film. Moreover, Bakshi's satirical impulse was by far the harshest indictment of the film's sudden popularity. The X-rated film, from the maker of *Fritz the Cat* (1972), featured animated versions of Brer Rabbit (here called "Brother Rabbit"), Brer Fox, and Brer Bear, framed by an Uncle Remus–like, live action narrative. *Coonskin's* invocation of *Song of the South* was unmistakable. While the film itself was aesthetically erratic, it explicitly negotiated *Song of the South's* cinematic vision of a white imaginary space, working through assumptions about how African Americans had been represented in mainstream American films up to, and including, the 1970s.

Each film's legacy was also telling. While *Song of the South* prospered, *Coonskin* was heavily criticized and quickly disappeared for good. *Song of the South's* white-affirming racial utopia worked toward reassurance, while *Coonskin's* shock value worked toward disruption. Aesthetically, *Coonskin* was new and different, a deconstruction of the institution of animation and representations of race. Like all classic Disney films, on the other hand, *Song of the South* was by the 1970s familiar, comforting, and powerfully *self-referential*. *Song of the South* was accepted because it had "always" been there for new generations raised on all things Disney. The ubiquity of Brer Rabbit children's books, *Disneyland* episodes, and Uncle Remus records throughout the 1950s and 1960s had repositioned the film in popular consciousness from an offensive anachronism to a steadfast part of U.S. culture. *Coonskin*, on the other hand, simply offended some and then vanished. Bludgeoning audiences affectively with deliberately offensive representations of sex, violence, and racial imagery proved counterproductive to the intended cause of social equality. *Coonskin*, and its creator in various interviews, were both so overtly antagonistic that they alienated even potentially sympathetic audiences, thus

denying the possibility for dialogue on racial inequality. *Coonskin* was an easy film for both progressives and conservatives to marginalize.

Yet its implications for *Song of the South*'s survival remained. As *Coonskin*'s controversies began to subside by the end of 1975, a subtler, but no less troubling, trend emerged. Conservative critics, such as Tom Shales, appropriated the controversy around *Coonskin* as another indictment of the state of the civil rights movement in the 1970s. The film's offensive nature, and the circular firing squad of liberal critics around it, came to symbolize the failure of the movement's progress on the eve of Reagan's election in 1980, and the new era of anti–civil rights conservatism it ushered in. Moreover, defenders of *Song of the South*, such as Leonard Maltin and Arthur Cooper, were also quick to contrast the Disney film's general lack of controversy in the 1970s with the negative attention paid to *Coonskin*. In both cases, the same disturbing tendency emerged: using the political intensity of the 1970s to suggest that an awareness of racial difference be abandoned altogether, in favor of a misguided, utopian color blindness that continues to shape racial discourse to this day.

Reactions to *Song of the South* in the late 1970s and 1980s are one way in which we see a new mobilization of "whiteness" in the United States. An emergent, deeply conservative form of racial consciousness largely denied race was an issue in society or even a valid category for identifying people. It was an "evasive" form of whiteness—not one that explicitly (or even knowingly) championed the rights of white people or the maintenance of white privilege. Instead, it avoided the categories and histories of race altogether. Discussions of *Song of the South* in the 1940s and 1950s focused mostly on the question of racial stereotypes. After the film's success and Disney's larger critical rebirth in the 1970s, this *evasive whiteness* reframed the 1946 film in a least two dramatic ways. For one, *Song of the South* was no longer seen as being "about race" at all, but rather a utopian, color-blind film that transcended racial categories. For another, the film's reception history was rewritten as a movie that was *once* considered inoffensive in the time period in which it was originally made, and thus, supporters argued, it should be accepted as such now.

Audiences' sudden dismissal of the cultural histories attached to *Song of the South* in the 1980s also reflects Disney's corporate articulation of "history." Writing in 1985, Michael Wallace argued that Disney systematically rewrote the United States' past in only the most utopian of ideas, through theme park attractions such as the "American Adventure" in Epcot Center. Here, all forms of dissent, conflict, and ugli-

ness were written out of the company's representation of U.S. history. Wallace quoted one Disney theme park designer as saying that "what we create is a 'Disney Realism,' sort of Utopian in nature, where we carefully program out all the negative, unwanted elements and program in the positive elements."[2] Disney justifies such an abuse of history because the company considers the presentation to be reassuring entertainment rather than something that truthfully represents the complexities of the past. Even more troubling though, as Wallace discussed, was how the gaps in history "get louder the closer the show [American Adventure] gets to the present."[3] The result, which is particularly relevant to my work, is that Disney's institutional representation of American history "implies our problems are things of the past." As I will show in this chapter and in the last one, on Internet fandom, audiences raised on Disney films, shows, and theme parks came to see U.S. history in just this way. *Song of the South*'s past troubles as a controversial film, and its own plantation mythology, became, at worst, distant problems that no longer needed to trouble contemporary audiences in the post-racial present. Disney reduced history to individual narratives of achievement, Wallace also noted, rather than "collective social movements."[4] Unsurprisingly, defenders of *Song of the South* saw their own personal memories of the film and of the Disney way of life as more relevant than the larger legacy of white privilege and institutional racism that the film perpetuated. This was a perception of the American past that discourses of Reaganism further promoted.

During the 1980s reception of *Song of the South,* the cultural logic of Reaganism worked to create contradictory conditions. Race no longer mattered *on the surface,* even while such logic had powerful material effects on U.S. domestic policy regarding race relations. Likewise, the past no longer mattered (like the history of the civil rights movement), even while many had a heightened attachment to nostalgia for life before the 1960s. *Song of the South*'s own hostile reception in the 1940s, and the twentieth-century history of American racial consciousness more broadly defined, was rewritten favorably by audiences who now saw their own fond personal memories as more relevant to any discussion of the film's offensiveness. In the first part of this chapter, I will begin by explaining the discourse of Reaganism a bit more, since it serves as the frame for the chapter. I then document in greater depth the controversies around *Coonskin,* and their implications for *Song of the South*'s subsequent reception.

This is followed by highlighting at length *Song of the South*'s explic-

itly linked relationship with Reagan's presidency. More than any other period in the film's nearly seventy-year reception, it is here that *Song of the South* is directly tied to a major historical event. Several people, both favorably and unfavorably, connected the theatrical return of the nostalgic *Song of the South* in 1980 to the election of the conservative 1950s icon as president. Then I will more clearly explain how theories of whiteness appeared in discourses around *Song of the South*, and how they reflected a larger attitude toward the invisibility of race (which Reaganism promoted). Finally, I discuss the substitution of personal memory as history, on which both evasive forms of whiteness and Reagan's individualistic appeal as an anti–civil rights conservative were largely dependent.

   The rest of the chapter attempts to flesh out these discursive categories with close readings of sources from the period, such as the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*. As with the second chapter, I focus mostly on various articles and letters to the editor within these periodicals. Whiteness, Reaganism, and personal memory as historical revisionism collectively created new conditions of possibility for subsequent generations. All three are central to understanding *Song of the South's* influence and popularity over the last thirty years. As a result, *Song of the South's* long-term legacy today is much more a product of Reagan's United States in the 1980s than of the post–World War II United States. If anything, this makes its anachronisms all the more troubling.

THE ANTI–CIVIL RIGHTS DISCOURSES OF REAGANISM

   A former movie and television actor, Reagan's impact on the United States was always inseparable, though not reducible to, his mediated presence. He embodied the ways that 1980s images of the United States were staged, transmitted, and manipulated for their symbolic value in the media. For Susan Jeffords in *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, visibility was a key component to Reaganism: "A nation exists . . . as something to be *seen*."[5] Ideas of a Reagan America began with specific cinematic *images* of a Reagan America. The disillusioned Vietnam veteran turned cold warrior John Rambo, protagonist of Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo* films, embodied this identity. This image inspired a larger cultural and historical vision of the nation, one of imperialistic dominance, physical strength, and whiteness as not only the norm but also a source of power. Importantly, Jeffords's medi-

ated conception of Reagan was in no small measure about attempting to rewrite history to fit conservative ideology through its (often-fictional) mediation. Rambo went back to Vietnam to win the war on-screen after it had already been lost in history.

Hence these images of American strength and superiority were far from politically or racially neutral. As Gray noted in his study of television, discourses of Reaganism were structured "to take away from blacks the moral authority and claims on political entitlement won in the civil rights movement of the 1960s."[6] This ideology was reinforced by images of African Americans on the small screen in the 1980s, such as *The Cosby Show*. In *Framing Blackness*, Ed Guerrero adds that films played a similar role:

> In the beginning of the 1980s and under the political impulse of Reaganism, blacks on the screen, in front of and behind the camera, found themselves confronted with the "recuperation" of many of the subordinations and inequalities they had struggled so hard to eradicate during the years of the civil rights movement and the emergence of Black Power consciousness that followed it. Thus the caricatures and stereotypes of Hollywood's openly racist past proved to be resilient demons as they were subtly refashioned and resurfaced in a broad range of films.[7]

It was also not uncommon for the "stereotypes of Hollywood's openly racist past" to hide in plain sight. We see this literally with the consistently successful recirculation of older Hollywood films through theatrical and home video (including bootleg) markets: *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *King Kong* (1933), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and *Song of the South*, as well as problematic Disney and Warner Bros. short-subject cartoons from the 1930s and 1940s. Even reruns of the controversial and quickly cancelled early television show *Amos 'n' Andy* ran well into the late 1960s. Many of these films attempted to deflect criticism by appealing to the historical unavoidability of that openly racist past. At the same time, their respective appeal was draped, like Reaganism, in the seemingly innocuous veil of illusory nostalgia for a simpler time. Thus it is not surprising that *Song of the South*'s 1980 theatrical appearance was explicitly linked to the conservative Reagan's electoral victory over the incumbent Democrat, Jimmy Carter, since Reagan's campaign was itself

heavily steeped in nostalgia for a certain conservative perception of the United States before the civil rights movement.

While not a Southerner himself, Reagan's political ascendancy was tied to race-baiting in the anti–civil rights South throughout the 1970s. As early as 1973, the *Washington Post* identified the new Republican Party as one that embraced a "new *Song of the South*," specifically citing an Atlanta meeting of the Southern Republican Conference in honor of then California Governor Reagan. At the event, Reagan reportedly said, "The nation is better off for the southern strategy." He was referring to Richard Nixon's successful electoral approach where Republicans manipulated racism among white Democrats to divide their opponents and take over elected representation of the American South.[8] After years of relatively quiet circulation, *Song of the South* in the 1980s would prove nearly as controversial as it had been in the 1940s. As I will show, both fans and critics linked the film to the hot-button racial issues surrounding Reaganism and Reagan's presidency. Reaganism played on white resentment and anger by demonizing African Americans through attacks on progressive government programs such as the welfare system and affirmative action. In a short time, Reagan managed to undo most of the progress on racial relations achieved during the previous decade and a half. Such work was structured around what Gray has called "the unnamed category of race,"[9] as conservatives carefully manipulated a "color-blind" logic that was quite reactionary yet *sounded* progressive. On the contrary, Reaganism gained strength in the United States as a direct reaction against the era of civil rights and racial discourses that preceded it.

COONSKIN AND THE "PERIOD OF ACUTE RACIAL SENSITIVITY"

If we have to stop making movies that offend anyone, we'll all be making Disney movies.
ALBERT S. RUDDY, *COONSKIN* PRODUCER

Song of the South had been largely uncontroversial in the 1970s. With a range of contemporary social issues still unresolved, detractors often saw its persistence as an unfortunate, but hardly surprising, annoyance from cinema's racist past. Instead, the racially charged film that

was controversial in the 1970s was *Song of the South*'s affectively intense satire: *Coonskin*. In addition to satirizing Disney, Bakshi's deliberately shocking representation of life in the inner city was also a product of, and a subversive response to, Hollywood's controversial "blaxploitation" period. These mostly studio films, released between 1969 and 1974, "featured black casts playing out various action-adventures in the ghetto."[10] Often motivated more by financial ambitions than newfound social awareness, these films emerged in large measure from Hollywood's growing desire to exploit profitable African American distribution markets.[11] Films like *Shaft* (1971) and *Super Fly* (1972) offered new cinematic visions of strong, assertive anti–Sidney Poitiers. That is, they featured black protagonists who celebrated their race rather than minimized it. Although admirable to the extent that it offered more roles to African American actors and touched superficially on the concerns of urban life, blaxploitation also depended on degrading narratives of murder, drug trafficking, and prostitution. Thus, as Ed Guerrero has noted, blaxploitation had a contradictory appeal, since it reflected and perpetuated racist white assumptions about the general violence and criminality of black life in the inner city.[12] As a satire of both Disney and blaxploitation, Bakshi's film directly negotiated this contradiction.

   Song of the South's reception history is incomplete without looking at *Coonskin*. As one of the last blaxploitation films of the period, *Coonskin* told the story of Brother Rabbit's journey from the American South to Harlem. There, he confronted an Italian gangster who was ruining the neighborhood. As Michael Gillespie argued, *"Coonskin* can be thought of as closer to the irrational and transgressive spirit of [the oral slave narrative] Brer Rabbit than has ever been previously imagined."[13] The film restored Brother Rabbit as a signifier of the black experience (in keeping with its origins), highlighted the grotesqueness of blaxploitation as a genre, and critiqued the ignorant whiteness and sentimental nostalgia of *Song of the South*. Although Bakshi's film was constructed as a critique of the Disney film, both *Song of the South* and *Coonskin* shared quite a bit in common. Both responded to Disney's legacy and its impact on animation: *Song of the South* was its affirmation, while *Coonskin* was its rejection. Both reflected childhood memories—the audiences' own nostalgia with Disney and *Song of the South*; Bakshi for his own childhood living in a predominately black neighborhood of Brooklyn and watching Disney cartoons. Both responded to the emergent popularity of blaxploitation and reflected white visions of the African American experience.

Both worked within, and further perpetuated, cinematic stereotypes of that same experience.

Finally, both *Song of the South* and *Coonskin* were criticized upon first release for many of the same reasons. In the mid-1970s, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and other activist groups protested Bakshi's film, ironically citing very similar criticisms to those that marred *Song of the South* three decades earlier. In both cases, detractors saw the film as an offensive white interpretation of African Americans that traded on grotesque and anachronistic (cinematic) stereotypes. While *Coonskin*'s cultural and aesthetic satire of *Song of the South* was valid, its X-rated approach and knowing deployment of racist imagery could certainly be seen as problematic. As a result of this controversy, Paramount dropped the film in late 1974; Bryanston Pictures eventually picked it up and distributed it as an "exploitation" picture. Despite an intense amount of media coverage of its controversies,[14] *Coonskin* quickly faded from theaters and public consciousness within a year. Bakshi's film has received little attention beyond obscure novelty screenings and uneventful VHS releases, in which it was tellingly retitled *Street Fight. Coonskin*'s affective power and grotesque images left audiences who finally did get a chance to see the film feeling generally confused and alienated.

Like other 1970s films, Bakshi's work was responding to larger shifts in Hollywood toward more permissive images of sex and violence, in which "blaxploitation" features like *Coonskin* played only one part. Its grotesque mix of Disney and graphic (albeit drawn) imagery commented ironically on *Song of the South*'s reassuring dissimilarity from increasingly explicit representations in Hollywood films at the time. One 1973 *Los Angeles Times* article directly suggested that *Song of the South*'s success was partly the result of a lack of quality family films in the marketplace.[15] That the success of *Song of the South* and other recycled Disney movies was as much a response to the lax regulations on sex and violence in general was also hinted at in a humorous 1972 letter written by an angry parent: "I think it is appalling that neighborhood theatres will charge a reduced rate ($1 in our area) to see 'R' or 'X' rated movies while a 'G' rated rerun '*Song of the South*' goes for full price at the same theater. Our 3-year-old was charged $.75. Is our society so sick that working families must pay a premium to see a family movie while 'adult' movies are cheaply disseminated to our youngsters?"[16]

Symptomatically, this also revealed the extent to which "family" fare and more "adult" films coexisted in the 1970s, even within the same

physical space. The success of the former was in part a response to the latter. Perhaps no other single film of the time internalized these contradictions—between family and adult audiences, between innocence and graphic sex and violence—as acutely as Bakshi's hybrid feature.

Coonskin merged these two otherwise incongruent subgenres into one deliberately grotesque and incoherent text to show how both rested on racist, and *thoroughly cinematic*, stereotypes about African American identity in the twentieth century. By the 1970s, Disney's nostalgic vision of the American South spoke to a "large, conservative white audience's . . . desire to, at least on screen, suppress the black revolt in all its manifestations and the white liberal-left social and cultural agenda built during the 1960s."[17] It was this audience that Guerrero identifies as making popular white reactionary vigilante fantasies like *Dirty Harry* (1972), *Walking Tall* (1973), and *Death Wish* (1974). These films often featured white cops cleaning up the same criminal urban spaces that blaxploitation glorified. While made for a different time, the reception of *Song of the South* was no less a response to the factors underlying blaxploitation as *Dirty Harry* was in 1972. Thus *Coonskin*'s appearance highlighted the superficially incoherent, but internally logical, cultural sense in which the early 1970s marked the sudden popularity of both blaxploitation and *Song of the South*.

Though hardly embraced by supporters of the civil rights movement, *Coonskin*'s aggressive, unapologetic style echoed the period's climate of racial rebellion. Meanwhile, Disney's nostalgic vision of pastoral simplicity and institutional racism appealed to audiences rediscovering open spaces via the American suburb. *Song of the South*'s successful reissue in the 1970s was the cinematic equivalent to the "white flight" that deeply affected American cities. As Guerrero notes about this time, "After years of urban riots and rebellions, shifting demographics accelerated as racial boundaries eroded, and most American cities found whites heading for the suburbs, abandoning city centers and their movie houses to inner-city blacks."[18] Both versions of the Uncle Remus tales appeared within the context of blaxploitation's niche popularity and the urban rebellion in the inner cities. The latter was provoked by years of racial tension and existing power structures sympathetic to white privilege. This urban decimation coexisted with the large-scale suburban migration of both white people and civic resources, which began with the desegregation of public schools in the 1950s. Likewise, *Song of the South* provided comfort in the form of outdated stereotypes to white people unsettled by the sudden power, authority, and autonomy that blacks had struggled to at-

tain in urban centers such as Harlem, Detroit, and the South Side of Chicago. These were centers of power that fifty years earlier would have been wiped out in white-instigated race riots (such as the Greenwood district of Tulsa, Oklahoma, had been). Bakshi's satire tried to highlight many of these ugly truths.

Yet *Coonskin*'s understanding of cultural politics and racial representations isn't simple either. Like all blaxploitation texts, Bakshi's visually and aurally challenging, adult-rated film can be also read as a liberatory white fantasy of how hopelessly violent and chaotic U.S. urban spaces had become in the aftermath of mass migration to the suburbs. Although the film itself did not appeal to those audiences, controversy around its aesthetic provocation symbolically reaffirmed for whites the need to leave the city, thereby reasserting racial order and boundaries. Reflecting the lack of direction within the civil rights movement, liberals and activists argued among themselves over the value of *Coonskin*. Its satirical logic may have shrewdly highlighted how the presence of *Song of the South* in the 1970s spoke to racist attitudes about American urban spaces. But the same can be said for Bakshi's film. *Coonskin* was made by a white Brooklyn native who had since moved to a wealthy section of Southern California at the start of his successful career. While detractors such as CORE missed or ignored *Coonskin*'s attempt at satire, the larger concern about the use of racist stereotypes was not without merit.

COONSKIN AND DEFENSES OF *SONG OF THE SOUTH*

Reactions to *Coonskin*'s controversial reception represent one of the earliest shifts in the increasingly revived perception of *Song of the South* itself. The provocative textuality of Bakshi's film, along with the critical backlash it elicited, were eventually appropriated by proponents of *Song of the South* to deflect attention from, and even validate, the latter. In nostalgic contrast to Disney's old film, *Coonskin* became an example of a truly "offensive" representation of African Americans in film. They contrasted the negative media attention and the verbal and visual intensity of *Coonskin*'s satire with the popular and politically uneventful appearance of *Song of the South* a couple years earlier. Disney's film, they deduced, was thus harmless, even morally positive, entertainment. Although *Coonskin* had been intended as a biting indictment of Disney animation, *Song of the South*, and the conservative audiences

that embraced both, its reception was quite different from that progressive goal.

Arthur Cooper addressed his 1975 review of *Coonskin* to a now-deceased Walt Disney in *Newsweek*. As with several reviews of the time, he criticized Bakshi's film as narratively uneven and unfunny. Cooper also directed attention back favorably to *Song of the South*. *Coonskin*, he wrote, has "got an R rating, which must stand for Ripoff because what he's done is turn [Disney's] Uncle Remus stories inside out." Instead of analyzing *Coonskin* further, Cooper nostalgically evoked memories of what he saw as Disney's more innocent version: "Last night I watched an old print of your '*Song of the South*,' with all those cute bluebirds and sharecroppers, and I think I'll send it to Bakshi. Although there were protests about [*Song of the South* in the past], in this case CORE ought to just let sleeping dogs snore."[19] Cooper's nostalgic lament highlighted how *Coonskin* received harsher criticism in the 1970s than did *Song of the South*. It also suggests the ways that negative reactions to Bakshi's film were appropriated to more conservative ends by Disney supporters. Cooper's review used the intensity around *Coonskin* to make the seeming simplicity of *Song of the South* more appealing to sympathetic critics and fans. Similarly, the film historian Leonard Maltin highlighted the *Coonskin* controversy in an entry on *Song of the South* in his book *The Disney Films*, published in 1984. Unapologetically reverent, his compilation offered information on the production histories, plot summaries, and critical receptions of every major Disney film ever made. For the second edition, Maltin added two sentences on *Coonskin* to his section on *Song of the South*: "There are still occasional protests [to *Song of the South*], though the worst of these seems mild compared to the reception given Ralph Bakshi's live-action/animated *Coonskin* in 1975—a protest so fiery that the film was disowned by its distributor! Ironically, *Coonskin* was a modern-day satire based in part on *Song of the South*."[20] Maltin did not explain why *Coonskin* was "so fiery," or how it was "a modern-day satire" of *Song of the South*. His reference to Bakshi's film did little more than deflect attention away from *Song of the South*'s past controversies. Disney's conservative film on the surface is a mild, less overtly offensive text than *Coonskin*'s abrasive satire. Yet what gets distorted is that Bakshi's film was not meant to be child- or family-friendly. In fact, *Coonskin* intended to provoke.

The intersection of *Coonskin*, Disney, and the legacy of the civil rights movement becomes increasingly entangled here. In addition to reframing the reception of Bakshi's film, Maltin perpetuated several

myths about *Song of the South*. For one, he intimated that it was always a huge box office hit. Another was that criticism of the film was muted in 1946, save for "some liberal reviewers and Negro organizations."[21] Maltin also suggested that "it was only in the 1960s, when civil rights became a major concern of the entire United States, that it became clear that *Song of the South* and films of that kind would be touching sensitive spots if shown again. Even the reissue of *Gone with the Wind* in 1967 sparked some (relatively minor) protest among certain Negro groups who objected."[22] But this is the exact opposite of what happened—*Song of the South* was most forcefully protested in the 1940s, not the 1960s. In the 1984 edition, Maltin even reworded one sentence to reject the "Uncle Tom" criticism of *Song of the South*. In 1973, Maltin wrote, "It is difficult to condemn a film of this kind, *Uncle Tom accusations notwithstanding*, for in spite of its syrupy story line and occasional flaws, *Song of the South* has some of the most delightful moments ever captured on film."[23] In 1984, however, Maltin rewrote this sentence to read, *"Accusations of Uncle Tomisms and quibbles over its syrupy storyline are ultimately defeated* by the film's sheer entertainment value."[24] The difference is noteworthy, given that most of the other pages on *Song of the South* are otherwise identical. The first edition appears to bracket off consideration of "Uncle Tom accusations," suggesting the concerns may have validity. Yet the second edition collapses those criticisms with the other reservations about the film, creating the impression that *every criticism* of *Song of the South* was overcome by its entertaining affect. In the context of his second edition, Maltin positioned *Song of the South* as a happy corrective, as reassurance, to the perceived trauma caused by *Coonskin*. In the long run, *Coonskin*'s controversies worked in support of the very same film it sought to criticize.

Just as white opposition to civil rights increased steadily in the late 1960s and 1970s, there was another backlash to *Coonskin*. As Maltin and Cooper's reactions demonstrated, the backlash was not in defense of *Coonskin*. Rather, the controversies around the film were used to deflect the question of racial difference altogether. In the void of liberal disagreements over Bakshi's film grew an unchallenged conservatism. The criticism of *Coonskin* was used to implicitly discredit the larger civil rights movement for greater equality in cinematic representation. In a review of Daniel Leab's 1975 book *From Sambo to Superspade*, Tom Shales commented in passing on the controversy. He noted that "one would think constructive forms of consciousness-raising, if such are possible, would be preferable to coercive tactics such as" CORE's call for

censorship of *Coonskin*.[25] He pointed out that around the same time, "pressure groups in New York [had] blocked the airing of a public television documentary because they thought it offensive."[26] For Shales, these were examples of how counterproductive the protests were. He went further, arguing that the notorious radio and later television program *Amos 'n' Andy* was "funny" and that "several black celebrities have said they did not find it objectionable."[27] Shales's review criticized Leab's book—which highlighted the ugly history of African American representations in Hollywood—for "righteous indignation" and for demanding too much progress too soon. By "asking a 1949 film to succeed at a 1975 level . . . ," he wrote, "Leab apparently expects films to reform overnight."[28] Yet Shales also undermined that same progress in representation by arguing that protest groups (such as CORE) had gone too far. The contradictions of an evasive whiteness begin to reemerge in Shales's piece, which criticizes any critical recognition of racial difference (in the service of white privilege).

Once devised as a particular kind of critique of *Song of the South*, *Coonskin*'s failure and de facto censorship became appropriated by Disney supporters as a vindication of the 1946 film's innocence and entertainment value, and as a deflection from the controversies Disney's movie had incited. In the 1984 edition of *Disney Films*, Maltin declared that "*Song of the South* has triumphed, and survived a period of acute racial sensitivity."[29] As framed, "a period of acute racial sensitivity" conflated both the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s with the controversy around *Coonskin* in the 1970s. This conservative denial of race in the 1980s celebrated an environment in which whites became less racially conscious, and where civil rights groups and media critics failed to mount an effective critique of films such as *Song of the South* and *Coonskin*. That progressive failure served those who wished for *Song of the South*'s survival. This confident assertion was particularly appropriate to the anti–civil rights movement of the 1980s.

Subsequently, *Song of the South*'s racist depiction of the plantation South, generally agreed on since the 1940s, was rejected by fans and Disney supporters by the 1980s. Sympathizers were emboldened by the controversy around *Coonskin*, by an increasingly conservative political climate, and by the continuing survival of the 1946 film. Although it's inaccurate to trace all this back to the release of *Coonskin*, negative reactions to that film symbolized in particular this twisted logic. The reactions to both films in the 1970s served as sobering snapshots of white America's decreasing racial consciousness. When *Song of the South* reap-

peared in the 1980s in this new condition of possibility, the film seemed tame, even harmless for many. The film was now a nostalgic journey from a beloved institution's past. Audiences during the emergent color-blind 1980s were suddenly quite anxious *not* to see race, or allow others to see race, in the Disney film. In retrospect, attacks on *Coonskin* were misplaced. As Bakshi's film faded, *Song of the South* would remain, far more resilient and insidious—the same sort of evasive whiteness that *Coonskin* had tried to deconstruct.

REAGANISM AND WHITENESS

By the 1980s, there was no greater symbol in the United States for the post-racial rewriting of history than Ronald Reagan. As the journalist Haynes Johnson explicitly noted, the return of *Song of the South* was symbolically appropriate to this newfound conservatism.[30] Meanwhile, a Venice Beach, California, newspaper's criticism of the film's planned appearance at the Fox Theatre in 1981 was one of several responses then, as I discuss later, to link the film directly to Reagan's election. During his presidency, the history of racial strife and difference was carefully rewritten into a "post-racial" United States that didn't want to see color (at the same time that he demonized minorities for political advantage). Disney's film was far from the only instance of such cultural logic, but its reception was a particularly prominent place for it. Material from the period suggests that *Song of the South*'s reception in the 1980s was never far removed from discussions about the sitting U.S. president. This culturally conservative, post-racial "whiteness" in President Reagan's America made for a welcoming environment in which to rerelease *Song of the South*—not once, but twice in a six-year span. Moreover, its continued endurance, at this point now over forty years, brought that historical and racial revision into particular relief.

By "whiteness," I do not mean simply the real power and privilege of being a white person in American society over the course of the twentieth century. Rather, I refer to "whiteness" as a discursive category, as a way of seeing the world. It is a particular racial identity, one that derives its power precisely from being ignored. There is great power in being unchallenged in that way, in being the unquestioned norm. The political policies of Reaganism sought to undo the accomplishments of the civil rights movement, and to protect that invisibility in particular. In his landmark work *White,* Richard Dyer defined the deconstructive project

of whiteness: "Seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world."[31] In contrast, Reaganism sought to affirm that authority by dismissing its ubiquity and advantages. One of its privileged positions was a particular understanding of history that rewrote past racial conflict to avoid strife in the present. Reagan and his followers' strategic deployment of discourses of whiteness in various contexts were politically and culturally successful because they worked through passivity and appeals to color blindness. Thus talking about race and Reaganism is trickier than it at first appears.

One of the central premises of whiteness is its own self-effacement— by extension, it also then denies political agency to nonwhite racial groups. The only instances of race that conservatives acknowledge are its most extreme iterations (e.g., *Coonskin* and the debates it sparked). Such moments include acts of racially motivated violence, or the use of racially derogatory words, where the material effects of racial difference become impossible to ignore. The irony of such instances is that they do not create space for dialogue on racial tensions in the United States, as Bakshi learned in the mid-1970s. Rather, it forecloses discussion by marginalizing the most extreme offenders as examples of "true" racism. Meanwhile, a subtler, but more pervasive and no less disturbing, racism is allowed to go on uncontested and even unnoticed, as the popularity of *Song of the South* suggested.

In an earlier work on race, nostalgia, and populist media representations of Detroit,[32] I articulated possible differentiations in the forms whiteness can take when people responded to racial representations in the media. For one, there was the overt "reactionary" whiteness that serves as a blatant display of hatred toward another race. Both progressives and conservatives would identify this kind of discrimination as racist behavior, though the latter would be inclined to argue that it serves as an exception that proves the rule (i.e., white people are not otherwise racist). Yet there is also the subtler, elusive form of whiteness, which is less interested in attacking minorities or in explicitly asserting white privilege. Instead, it focuses on deflecting questions of race entirely, an *"everyday, evasive whiteness."*[33] It is this form of whiteness with which *Song of the South*'s reception generally aligns during and beyond the 1980s. Yet, as in the case of Reagan's policies, such denial works in support of institutional racism far better than do explicitly racist forms of white-

ness. By avoiding its own racialization, Reaganism actively seeks to deny *any* awareness of racial difference—an awareness necessary to effect any meaningful social change. The reception of *Song of the South* in the 1980s, far more than in earlier periods, responded to the controversies of the film's stereotypes through this discourse of evasive whiteness.

In one of the more intense instances, disagreements emerged over a planned early-1981 screening of *Song of the South* at the Fox Venice Theatre in Southern California. As with *Coonskin*, the debate was as much between different groups of liberal activists as between progressives and conservatives. While one newspaper called the film "fascist" and linked it to the Ku Klux Klan and racially motivated murders in the recent news, another group said that such hyperbole was counterproductive at best. The latter organization, ironically, was the one to call for a boycott in the first place, citing what it identified as *Song of the South*'s more "'Mickey Mouse' pernicious [form of] racist" representation.[34] Playing on a double meaning with the cultural use of "Mickey Mouse" as a derogatory term for the trivial, their argument was that the film was a more subtle, mundane form of offense than a movie like *Birth of a Nation*, which deliberately played on extreme racist stereotypes.

And therein lay some of the key contradictions in mounting a coherent critique of *Song of the South* in the 1980s. The film became so outdated that its offensiveness was hard for some to see. This was complicated by the fact that any discussion of "race" within criticism was often met with a harsh rebuttal. Sometimes even that rebuttal came from other liberals and African Americans, who were apparently exhausted by the question of racist representations in Hollywood films. This was highlighted after an activist, Ron Finney, wrote an editorial criticizing *Song of the South* in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1981. In contrast to 1946, D. A. Young, a self-described "white liberal," responded in a letter to the editor, "I am increasingly dismayed by the racially nit-picking pronouncements of 'black leaders' such as Ron Finney. '*Song of the South*' movies [*sic*] are not the problem . . . [in] our society [with] the so-called 'black image.'"[35] Young's "liberal" status may be questionable given that ultimately the letter seems to blame blacks for their own problems. Young believed that time was better spent helping the African American community than in criticizing movies. Also responding to Finney, Mary Coates had a similar take on the efficacy of such criticism. She claimed that, as a black woman, it was "people like Finney who will retard our growth as people."[36] Both critiques suggested that the film was not significant to the larger material issues involving African American

progress. They missed, however, that the problem with *Song of the South* was not how it negatively affected African American audiences directly, but rather how it reaffirmed institutional racism and white privilege for white and black audiences.

Disney's film was and is exactly that sort of subtle, everyday, evasive racism that circulates uncontested because it's not explicitly offensive enough for most people to appreciate why so many objected for so long. It perpetuates racist stereotypes under a fantastical affective veil of good-will and harmony. The heated responses to *Coonskin* laid the groundwork for a completely backward, but very real, cultural logic of whiteness that would become ubiquitous in discussions of race in the 1980s—according to this viewpoint, the most racist thing one could do was to acknowledge race as an issue in society. For example, *Song of the South* itself is always a narrative representation of African Americans in the imaginary Old South, and of racial relations in a deeply controversial place and time in American history. Yet only in pointing out this otherwise-obvious fact does a criticism of the film suddenly become "racial," as if race does not exist in a film entirely focused on a (former) slave serving the logistical and emotional needs of a rich white child.

REAGAN AND THE 1980 RERELEASE OF *SONG OF THE SOUTH*

Song of the South's third rerelease, only eight years after its second, both reflected and reactivated these deeply conservative attitudes toward race. Meanwhile, the connection between *Song of the South* and the emergence of Reagan's successful political career resonated with conservative commentators as well as progressive audiences. Several articles in the early 1980s explicitly tied *Song of the South* to the incoming Reagan administration. Days after the first set of responses appeared to Finney's article, another person wrote to criticize. But the author conflated Finney's article with others that he attacked for supporting affirmative action. David C. Phillips wrote that collectively these articles "offered one of the best composite defenses for business-as-usual under equal employment opportunity and affirmative action."[37] Phillips stated his situation as a white Protestant male who had been unable to find steady employment for a year and a half. He expressed frustration that he was not entitled to what he saw as the same benefits African Americans received:

It seems that "fair employment" is not really fair! Nor does "equal opportunity" give us all similar opportunities. It also seems "affirmative action" assumes employers are branded guilty of racial bias and discriminating practices, until proven innocent! All this, apparently, under the current laws!

How do I spell relief? On Nov. 4, 1980, I spelled it "GOP"![38]

While not explicitly addressing the Disney film's merits, Phillips tied the heated *Los Angeles Times* debates over *Song of the South* caused by Finney's op-ed directly to other political issues such as affirmative action. Moreover, he explicitly related that personal frustration with progressives to his own decision to support Republicans in the upcoming election. A vote for Reagan was posited here as a direct reaction against the same civil rights movement that also criticized *Song of the South's* racist depictions of African Americans.

Liberals also tied *Song of the South's* return to Reagan's ascendance. In "Eyes Shut, Clock Unwound," Haynes Johnson mockingly described the theatrical presence of rereleased older titles in the 1980s. He specifically cited the return of Alfred Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder* (1954) and *Song of the South*. Disney's film, he noted sarcastically, "will take us back 'to the laughing place.' *Song of the South* features the wise sayings of a darky named Uncle Remus and his animal friends." In his article, Johnson focused on the larger shift toward nostalgia for the distant past, while also tying this trend in with overall movements of the period: "All of America, it seems, is preparing for a step back into the supposedly more innocent past—and appears eager to get there as fast as possible. The other day an aide to one of the Republicans who will assume new power in the Senate, thanks to the election outcome signaling the advent of the new political era, was talking about the promise of the Reagan presidency and what it means for the country. We're going back to the '50s, this person said, and it will be great."[39] *Song of the South* was rereleased at a time when Reagan's election as president, and the shift he signaled from the liberal policies of the 1970s, was very much on people's minds. The connection was supported by the link between Walt and Reagan, two California conservatives who were friends (and friendly witnesses to HUAC). The washed-up actor himself even cohosted the live broadcast of Disneyland's opening in 1955.

For Johnson, *Song of the South* came to stand in for the 1950s, rather

than the earlier decade in which the film was originally released. John-son argued that the senator's aide was deeply misguided in his percep-tion of the past, reading the fifties as a simpler time of prosperity, peace, and uniformity. Johnson pointed to the period's myriad problems: sexual repression, racial tension, character assassination, a sudden awareness of the Mafia, the Korean War, and more general conditions of fear during the cold war. The arguments Johnson laid out here anticipate the politi-cal theses he would later outline in two of his more well-known books, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years* and *The Age of Anxiety: McCarthyism to Terrorism.* Johnson argued that "it was the '50s that saw the beginning of the Civil Rights revolution that would transform much of American life: building since the Civil War, the in-evitable Civil Rights confrontation between the federal government and the states occurred in September of 1957, in Little Rock—and it was the '50s that saw racial violence stain the land in the aftermath of the Free-dom Marches and burning of buses in the South. . . . Some model of normality to wish to recapture and relive 30 years later." Johnson would know, since he won a Pulitzer Prize in 1966 for covering the racial con-flicts between blacks and whites in Selma, Alabama. Johnson's historical anecdote reaffirmed how the 1980s appeal of the "darky" Uncle Remus was symptomatic of a culturally conservative desire to return to a sim-pler time. "Good times," he wrote sarcastically, "take it away. Happy days are here again."[40] This political longing was explicitly foregrounded with Reagan's election.

Johnson's reaction to *Song of the South* was hardly unique. A par-ticularly interesting case study in the relationship between Reaganism, memory, history, and whiteness was activated by the return of *Song of the South* to Venice Beach, California, in March 1981. More a revival house than first-run venue, the Venice Theatre specialized in showing clas-sic Hollywood films. There were at least two groups of activists working against *Song of the South*'s planned release in Venice—the Anti-Racism Coalition itself and the *Venice Beachhead*'s sympathetic coverage of the protests. The coalition itself was backed by the *Beachhead*, which called the film "fascist" in one headline. The newspaper's polemic also posited *Song of the South*'s rerelease in the context of Reagan's election. Without offering any evidence as to why they felt the connection existed between Disney and then president-elect Reagan, the paper's writers nonethe-less believed that "Walt Disney Studios is celebrating Ronald Reagan's election by re-releasing *Song of the South* as their contribution to the resurgence of the right wing. At a time when the Ku Klux Klan has re-

emerged in California and in North Carolina to kill people in the streets in broad daylight, at a time when Black children are being murdered in Buffalo, Atlanta and Oakland, the Fox Venice has scheduled *Song of the South*."[41] This community action was more aggressive and harsh in its protest of *Song of the South*'s showing than anything written in the *Los Angeles Times*. Their rhetoric seemed to be a continuation of the 1970s, when organizations such as CORE regularly targeted racist representations of minorities in Hollywood films (e.g., the *Coonskin* controversy).

The *Beachhead* article on the protests began by asking its readership rhetorically if parents should take their kids to a "'children's movie,' in which Black people are slaves, are shown to be happy working all day and singing all night, in which they are portrayed as grown children, never angry at their condition of enforced dependency or at the whites who rule them, and in which they are filled with love for those who oppress them? . . . Should you let your children be exposed to these vicious and harmful racist ideas and images in this film?"[42] The article then announced a call for action, asking people to boycott the film and join a picket line outside the theater.[43] The newspaper's coverage of *Song of the South*'s boycott was not short on hyperbole. Even the Anti-Racism Coalition itself later wrote in to contest the publication's version of events. The paper's hard-line position was restated further in the article:

> The last 20 years have seen many strides made by the Civil Rights movement and the resulting, though very slight, bettering of life for some Black people here. But now, with the economy in a mess, the Klan is on the rise again to once more put Blacks, and other non-white people, in their place. The political manifestation of the rise of racism is the election of Ronald Reagan espousing the politics of the right replete with the same "states rights" policies of Rutherford B. Hays 100 years ago. This is once again, the beginning of the end of Reconstruction—a call to return to earlier and simpler times when Blacks knew, and stayed in, their place. Small wonder that this is also a time for the re-issuance of *Song of the South*.[44]

Divergent critics of *Song of the South* sometimes spent as much time attacking one another as criticizing the film itself. Despite the coalition's subsequent success at having the screening cancelled, the group itself was not happy with the *Venice Beachhead*'s representation of their posi-

tion. A month later, a coalition leader wrote to the paper to criticize its depiction of the movement. While grateful for the positive support, the Anti-Racism Coalition organizer Ed Pearl protested the article's headline, which had described *Song of the South* as "fascist." "First of all, it is inaccurate," he wrote. "Nobody claimed [the film] as fascist, genocidal, or anything other than 'Mickey Mouse' pernicious racist."[45] Pearl's larger concern was that such hyperbole would, by alienating most readers, undermine the very effort his group was trying to make. Pearl made the observation that the parents themselves had grown up on, and had strong affective attachments to, cartoons—almost all of which were in some way sexist, racist, or violent. To attack any of these texts carelessly was to risk turning away the adults they were attempting to educate. Moreover, defenders of *Song of the South*, wrote Pearl, would respond to such an extreme position by marginalizing it entirely: "The forces of reaction will no doubt point to this headline to label both yourselves and the protesters of this film as reckless leftists and censors of cartoons. This diminishes your voice and our effectiveness as organizers against the growing racism of this political period. We do not wish to be dismissed and that headline did not help."[46]

Pearl's concern proved in some ways justified. At least two people later took issue with the headline's implication that *Song of the South* was "fascist." This objection was then deployed to reject the larger, and more justified, criticisms of the film. In that same issue of the *Beachhead*, David Fertik argued that the headline was "frightening" and "seemed to . . . incite your readers and to frighten them and coerce Fox [Theatre's] management to capitulate." Fertik took issue with the move toward censorship that the paper and the coalition seemed to be advocating, turning the *Beachhead*'s language against itself: "To me censorship especially in the arts and communications is the worst sign of impending fascism in a free society. . . . Are your actions any different from the 'Moral Majority' stopping a local movie theatre in Yahoo, Mississippi from showing *Hearts and Minds* by calling it commie propaganda, or *Last Tango in Paris* by calling it a film of sexual perversion?" Fertik resisted the link to Reagan, and instead believed that *Song of the South* was actually the opposite of everything the new president stood for. "Spiritually," he noted, "the film suggests that happiness is not a function of wealth and power— what a threatening idea for the Reagan administration."[47]

Fertik argued that *Song of the South*'s emphasis on finding joy in the simple things in life contradicted Reagan's emphasis on the accumulation of wealth through policies such as deregulation and reckless tax cut-

ting. But one of the *Beachhead*'s original criticisms of *Song of the South* was that "the lesson of the film is that life is as it should be. Any person—Black or white, child or adult—who wants to change their unhappy situation and leave the 'plantation' for a better life will always experience something worse. . . . The psychological lesson learned by children who identify with Br'er Rabbit is that what is, is better than what could be."[48] This suggested that one of *Song of the South*'s "lessons" is that black, but also poor and lower-middle-class white people, should accept their economic and social status in life. In theory, that worked *in support* of a Republican presidency focused on making the rich richer ("trickle-down economics") at the expense of the other contented classes. Fertik took exception to the *Beachhead*'s use of hyperbole, just as the Anti-Racism Coalition had. He criticized the loose connection drawn between the film and larger historical developments:

> Your article suggests that *The Song of the South* [*sic*] was to be shown by the Fox [Theatre] and was released by Disney Studios to celebrate Reagan's election and the return of right wing power. This is then linked up to the KKK and the killing of black children around the country. To me, this is irresponsible, yellow journalism of the worst kind, especially considering the proximity of the Oakwood neighborhood, a neighborhood beset by unemployment, drug abuse, and violence. . . . You created a dangerous situation by suggesting that the Fox was showing a film that you say creates a climate for the killing of black children. This coercion is not calm, clear, rational communication. This is fascism.[49]

Fertik's response was as careless as the article he criticized. There was a slippery logic in comparing *Song of the South* to contemporary racial violence. At the same time, the film appealed to people who embraced its vision of racial and economic inequalities in the United States. Published five months later in the *Los Angeles Times*, fellow Venice resident Thomas Pleasure's response reinforced Fertik's point about the problematic extremity of the original *Beachhead* piece. The coalition, he wrote, "opposed the screening on the grounds that it was 'racist to the core,' that Uncle Remus was a racist tool and that the animated fables were clever devices designed to keep the 'natives' down on the farm, to keep them accepting of slavery."[50] Like Pearl, Pleasure found the controversy

counterproductive, taking issue with the idea that the film was fascist. He believed that "the censorship of the film hurts the black-awareness movement far more than it helps it." Pleasure touched on a defense that would become increasingly common. He felt that the white characters in *Song of the South* were portrayed much less sympathetically than were the black ones. Identifying what he saw as an "anti-white bias," Pleasure insisted, "Each time I left the theatre feeling elated but with the distinct impression that the white people had been raked over the coals in a subtle way. Whether it was the rich plantation owners or the poor white trash, these white Southerners were portrayed as unfeeling, uptight and downright stupid." This defense vaguely echoed the earlier logic of reverse discrimination that Phillips argued for concerning the film's critiques in the wake of affirmative action. They both believed that whites, not blacks, were the ones really offended. Pleasure joked that "whites may wish to censor the film just to save face." [51] He did not so much deny the offensive aspects of *Song of the South* as he deflected it. Arguing that the film is merely a product of a racist past, he insisted that the blacks portrayed are the more likeable and honorable characters.

Still other critiques of *Song of the South* that tied it to the U.S. president surfaced at this time. As I noted earlier, Finney wrote an editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* attacking *Song of the South*'s latest rerelease: "We've seen 1980 close with the re-release of a film that has debased blacks for 34 years. The fact that Walt Disney Productions' *Song of the South* is circulating during the holiday season is a callous addition to the web of disrespect that surrounds blacks." Finney situated the reappearance in relation to a number of other recent events, including Reagan's election and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. He also specifically summarized the problems with *Song of the South*'s representations. He noted "slaves returning from the fields, singing in perfect harmony about how fortunate they are to be on the plantation"; the young black child— "in a take-off on the coon-scared-of-the ghost bit, Toby having to pinch Johnny to confirm that he is real"; and the cartoon characters "all having either tattered hats or coon dialects—or both—just like the human coon characters. Even the tarbaby dummy wears a tattered hat." [52]

His largest compliant was the effect *Song of the South* had on children, particularly white children, and their perceptions of African Americans. "Numerous studies have shown," he argued, "that children get their view of the world as much, if not more so, from the media as much as from school." His argument about a film's effect serves as a reminder that deployment of the "child" as a discursive move is inherently neither con-

servative nor progressive. Finney mentioned some children's reactions to the movie's conclusion: "When I saw *Song of the South* in a Westwood theater, the worst of it came, for me, when the house lights went up. The audience, all white except for me, applauded. One woman nearby stood, stretched and said to her kids, 'Wasn't that nice? How'd you like it?' In reply, the kids literally skipped out of the theatre—singing 'Zip-ah-de-doo-dah.'"[53] For Finney, the children seemed happily oblivious to the film's negative representation of racial relations. Not surprisingly, his observations about *Song of the South* ruffled some feathers. Like Paul Cooke's critical letter to the *Washington Post* in 1946, Finney's editorial provoked a spirited response. Unlike the *Post* letter, however, it was far from a unanimous reaction. In fact, in sharp contrast, the letters overall were mostly supportive of *Song of the South*, and critical of Finney for mentioning race at all.

The *Los Angeles Times* devoted an entire section to the responses generated by his op-ed.[54] The first four letters alternated between positive and negative, while the last three all condemned his comments, albeit for different reasons. It is impossible to determine whether the balance of responses was representative of all letters sent in, or how the *Times* went about selecting which letters to publish. Supporting Finney's argument, Denise Henderson wrote, "It really disgusted me to see the movie coming back," while Jan Brown said, "I had decided not to take my children to see *Song of the South* because I knew it presented damaging and offensive images." The focus for Brown was also on children, as she insisted, "We parents can no longer dismiss this type of humor as harmless while struggling to raise healthy, wholesome children in a society plagued by young alcoholics [referencing criticisms of ethnic stereotypes in Disney's *Aristocats*, 1970] and witnessing the Ku Klux Klan's attempts to make their violent message appealing to youngsters."

On the other side of the ledger, Luella Green wrote, "I have but one comment . . . hogwash! It is just such attitudes as [Finney's] that set back the so-called 'movement.' How could any thinking person see that movie as a racial slur?"[55] Green felt that *Song of the South*'s utopian conception of race relations was a boon to the same "so-called" civil rights movement she felt Finney undermined. This explicitly reinforced the contradictory color-blind logic of Reaganism. Her argument, like those of many defenders over the years, was that blacks were the only sensitive people in the film, and thus the representation was not racist. These rhetorical moves are interesting, and not only in their defense of *Song of the South*. More telling is their attempt to silence dissent by condemning

critics for supposedly undermining the very causes they claim to champion. In the same set of letters, Coates's appropriation of the oppositional language suggested as much. "Finney's article brought to sight," she argued, "how narrow-minded and bigoted our country has become over the years"—despite the fact that Finney's criticisms of *Song of the South* were nothing particularly new in the 1980s.

REAGANISM'S POPULIST REVISION OF PERSONAL MEMORY AS HISTORY

By this time, however, the social history was less important than the personal nostalgia that was firmly a factor in *Song of the South*'s enduring, even expanding appeal. Criticizing the Disney film forty years after its first appearance was complicated by nostalgia's inherent temporal ambiguities—a historical mistiness of which Reaganism took full advantage. In *The Reagan Range: The Nostalgic Myth in American Politics*, James Combs argued that the president used his own personal narrative of progress to shift our understanding of history away from collective movements to private memories. This then was mobilized into a political power that attempted to change American history. The 1960s and 1970s were rewritten as an era marked not by progress in equality but by chaos in the existing social order. A figure rooted in nostalgia for the 1950s, according to Combs, Reagan "appeared in the present of the fallen 1980s as representative of the reformed Rockwell of the 1950s, a model of assured affluence and cultural continuity. He came to political power as a reaction against the reforms and innovations of the 1960s and as a spokesman for a coalition that won the Presidency in the wake of pessimism and exhaustion of the 1970s."[56]

Yet this was also a Reagan "coalition" paradoxically centered on an individualism rooted in the substitution of positive personal memories for the uglier parts of history. Combs argued that Reagan's political identity was structured around the belief "that only the personal and not the political past was relevant to the present and offered himself as a personal paragon who has forgotten or denied the all-too-real past" of civil rights advances in the 1960s and 1970s.[57] As a result, some audiences lost sight of just how offensive *Song of the South* was in 1946. For example, Maltin downplayed any past controversy in *The Disney Films*, inaccurately stating that people "flocked to see the film and made it a major Disney mon-

eymaker, both in its initial release and on re-issue in 1956."[58] Supporters instead came to embrace the populist historical belief that all films from the golden age of Hollywood were racist to some degree or another. From this vantage point, *Song of the South* should be seen simply as a product of a different age. The past is both evaded and revised.

This, in turn, has a powerful impact on how nostalgia was mobilized to silence criticism of *Song of the South* in the 1980s. Personal, deeply nostalgic memories for a perceived simpler time became substitutes for a larger history of inequality that had originally framed discussions of the film. Defending the film against Finney in the *Los Angeles Times*, Coates also argued that any criticism of *Song of the South* was racially misguided: "How could anyone be so racial in his judgment of a Disney movie that is pure fantasy and entertainment?"[59] In this reading, the country has evolved in its racial consciousness to the point where discussing Uncle Remus's race at all was itself an act of bigotry. Following this logic, however, it is not clear how the country used to be less "narrow-minded" when the film first appeared. A key moment for evasive whiteness is when *any* mention of race becomes a racist act.

By the 1980s, the history of *Song of the South* becomes conflated with a range of sometimes-contradictory public and personal histories. In his *Los Angeles Times* article on the Venice controversy, Pleasure further defended the film with the following argument: "To charge that a film about the antebellum South is biased and racist goes without saying. What film of '39 isn't?"[60] Quite possibly, Pleasure was confusing the Disney film with the movie its Southern melodramatic structure was emulating, Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* (which *was* released in 1939). Writing about the film's rerelease on the heels of Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, Haynes Johnson argued that both developments signaled a desire to return to the 1950s. That the film was technically from 1946 was just one more historical ambiguity, even for liberals. The past is both ignored and rewritten by reactionary influences, moving back to an imaginary period when conservatives saw race as a nonissue. Evasive forms of whiteness, often passively, work in support of such historical ignorance. By denying racial difference, whiteness also necessarily denies the long, ugly history of conflict with which such difference came. The reception of *Song of the South* in the 1980s draws out how the evasion of race always coexists with the evasion of history.

In November 1986, forty years after first appearing in Atlanta, *Song of the South* was released for its final theatrical run. Despite the fact it once

more enjoyed box office success, grossing $16 million in American the-
aters,[61] the film's controversy was becoming too much for Disney. Over-
all the critical reaction was more muted this time, just as the 1956 release
had been more uneventful than the heated controversies of 1946. The
Los Angeles Times film critic Charles Solomon wrote a review focused
on the film's landmark use of animation. He even repeated the *New
York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther's quip that the ratio of live action
to cartoon was equivalent to "the ratio of its mediocrity to its charm,"
which Solomon added was "a judgment that the intervening 40 years
have only confirmed." Solomon dedicated only one paragraph near the
end to acknowledging the controversies surrounding the film. He ob-
served that "even more dated are the depictions of the black characters:
the film is very much a '40s Hollywood vision of the Ole South. The field
hands march to and from work in neatly pressed clothes, singing elabo-
rate choral arrangements of spirituals. Although Uncle Remus is permit-
ted to exchange a conspiratorial wink with the shrewd old grandmother,
he and Toby remain passive characters who patiently endure scoldings
for things that aren't their fault." Solomon did not make a distinction
between "a '40s Hollywood vision of the Ole South" and criticisms of
that vision during the time *Song of the South* was made. This obscured
the fact that the film's "depiction of black characters" was not generally
accepted in 1940s mainstream publications either. This also reinforced
the belief that it was just an uncritical product of its time. *Song of the
South*, Solomon summarized, was "essentially a nostalgic valentine to a
past that never existed, and within those limits, it offers a pleasant, fam-
ily diversion for holiday afternoons when the children get restless."[62]

   That *Song of the South* is "essentially a nostalgic valentine to a past
that never existed" bears closer attention. The concept of nostalgia for
"a past that never existed" is redundant. Feelings of nostalgia are always
predicated on seeing the past as much more simplistic than it had been.
By the mid-1980s, the idea of a past that never existed worked on at least
two levels. On the one hand, nostalgic appeals to an illusory past were
motivated by the film's conception of the South in a post-Reconstruction
United States. On the other, nostalgia for a nonexistent past just as easily
applied to people in the 1980s who had not seen the film since its earlier
appearances during their own childhood. Over the decades, it became
increasingly common for people to preface their discussion of *Song
of the South* with an anecdote of when they first saw the film. In the
Beachhead's controversial piece, the anonymous editorialist criticized

the rerelease as follows: "Many of us grown-ups haven't seen *Song of the South* for 20–30 years, and only remember a warm, happy film with live people and funny carton [*sic*] characters. Remember Br'er Rabbit and his thorny shelter, the Briar Patch, the beautiful singing Bluebird, the happy people working and singing who are never really dirty or tired? Well, only vaguely, and certainly not as a racist movie! But these happy people were slaves and the whites, whom they supposedly love so much, had the power of life and death over them."[63] This is one of the first instances in which a critical response to *Song of the South* also worked through the assumptions of its own nostalgic pull. In essence, the writer tried to make the point that one's past impressions (the childlike innocence with which he or she first viewed *Song of the South*) might not be accurate. If they were, then other ideologies not easily noticed were at work as well. Tied into the concept of evasive whiteness is a slippery use of personal memory that lends itself to the rewriting of history.

Also at the time of *Song of the South*'s final theatrical release, the cultural and literary critic James Snead wrote a front-page op-ed against the film for the *Los Angeles Times*. Snead took seriously the question of historical distortion around the film's circulation for the last forty years. The article is largely an attempt to remind readers of just how offensive the film and its history really were. He added that *Song of the South* was "already outdated when the film was released in 1946. Four decades of racial progress have seemingly gone unrecognized."[64] Snead focused on highlighting historical facts about the film: that it was (like Harris's stories) an uneven mixture of oral slave tradition and white interpretation; that a vast majority of the film is actually live action, which is the most insulting part; that it was inappropriate after World War II, and thus offensive even at the time of its first release; that many criticized the film when it first premiered, including those who usually championed Disney's artistic innovations; and that even Disney hesitated through the years to continue releasing the film because of its offensive representations. "In continuing to reissue *Song of the South*, however, Disney perpetuates myths of plantation life (kind master, contented servant, pastoral harmony) that had been convincingly exposed and rejected well before 1946," wrote Snead. "The implicit and explicit untruths of *Song of the South* are made to seem both comforting and entertaining." Snead's exposure of "the implicit and explicit untruths" of the film more forcefully confronted how *Song of the South*'s past "never existed." Snead reiterated how "the Africa-derived tales that Harris transcribed on his

Georgia plantation in the 1880s allowed the real plantation blacks to es-
cape the humiliation inflicted upon them by the plantation system."[65]
Brer Rabbit's stories were parables that represented the slave's ability to
outsmart his master and the other slaves. Snead's point was all the more
relevant at a time when Harris's presence in American culture, as the
scholar Hugh Keenan also noted around the same time,[66] seemed to be
rapidly fading compared to the Disney's film's growing popularity.

Soon after publication, Douglas Kermode wrote a response that con-
tested Snead's representation of history. Like many defenders of *Song of
the South* since the 1980s, Kermode claimed to have seen the film as a
child, thus appealing to his own perceived innocence. Rather than deny
the film's offensiveness, Kermode argued that Snead was simply substi-
tuting one myth for another. "Is it any more true to say that there were
no benevolent whites and that all blacks suffered in the Old South," he
asked rhetorically, "than it is to claim that blacks were happy-go-lucky
and massah was kindly? I don't believe seeing *Song of the South* as a
child warped my later views on slavery."[67] While noting that plantation
history was perhaps more complicated than Snead suggested, Kermode
overlooked how the larger concern with *Song of the South* was not how it
distorted slavery in the past; rather, Snead was more concerned with the
present issue of "psychological damage done by the racial stereotypes."
To a point, Kermode was refreshingly blunt as far as defenders went:
"The truth is, the black man was dragged here in chains and has since
been beaten with those chains just for being here. It is an ugly truth, and
I am glad that I had Disney's myth to enjoy as a child (I cannot remem-
ber how 'truthful' I thought the film was at the time)."[68] While it may
not be so novel for a fan to suggest that Disney's entertaining "myth"
offset the "psychological damage done," more unusual is his willingness
to grant validity to the racial and historical concerns raised by criticisms
of the film, and to hold those in tension with its utopian affect. Such a
balanced consideration by the film's most passionate fans was rare. It still
worked to deny that the film was a threat to race relations today, or even
a truly racist depiction of African Americans, but it did not accuse the
film's critics of racism either.

A common paradox when defending *Song of the South* was that the film
is both a representation of a harsh period of American history (the South-
ern plantation) and a harmless children's fantasy. This was also revealed
in Coates's response to Finney in 1981. *Song of the South* is defended as
"pure fantasy and entertainment," and then, in the very next sentence, as

"part of black heritage as much as slavery and the Civil War."[69] *Song of the South* is acceptable, Coates reasoned, because slavery and the Civil War are historical facts. Yet she also argued that this background does not matter anyway, because the film is entirely a fantasy. This emphasis on the film as nothing more than whimsy was echoed throughout the other negative responses to Finney's *Times* piece. "What Finney neglects to take into account . . . ," wrote Rev. Sean Stewart, "is that *Song of the South* was not intended as an accurate historical documentary of the pre- or antebellum South; anymore than the outrageous 'tall tales' of Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan are intended as accurate historical accounts of the settling of the West." T. A. Heppenheimer, meanwhile, echoed this ontological defense of the film, implying that children are smart enough to recognize that cartoons are not real. "If we believe, with Finney, that children gain their images of reality from cartoons," Heppenheimer argued, "then we must expect they believe rabbits can talk, road-runner birds can outrace a cannonball and coyotes can construct elaborate engineering works atop cliffs or in the middle of highways."[70] Yet these arguments ignored how Finney's criticisms were directed not at the animated sequences in *Song of the South* but rather the live action ones featuring depictions of historical distortion and social inequities.

The question of memory, and its reliability, becomes a significant point of contention here. In one response defending *Song of the South* in relation to the controversial *Beachhead* incident, Fertik suggested that "if *Song of the South* is so dangerous, how did you guys manage to grow up to be the equalitarians you are? You admit in the article only 'remembering the film as a warm happy film with live people and funny cartoon characters.'"[71] When critics of the film confess to not noticing the racist elements when they were children, he argued, why would the film make racists of young people viewing *Song of the South* today? Fertik's deeply nostalgic logic here implies that perhaps life is just as simple for a child as adults may wish to think. If children don't notice the racism, he implied, then it doesn't really matter. Fertik's proposed position is problematic to be sure, but it also spoke to the power of nostalgia and memory in relation to the film's presence in American theaters in the 1980s. The inherent nebulousness of time's passage allowed for historical accounts of *Song of the South*'s controversies in the 1940s and 1950s to be brushed aside, substituted with personal memories. If I can remember the film so fondly from the past, such ahistorical logic suggests, then it could not have been so bad after all.

THE EMERGENCE OF
EVASIVE WHITENESS

Song of the South played in U.S. theaters through early 1987. By then, a Reaganist discourse of evasive whiteness that denied race, to the benefit of whites, was to become further engrained in popular periodicals of the time. Shortly after Snead's article appeared, *Song of the South* played a second-run theater, the Webster, in Hartford, Connecticut. Aside from being one of the last known times that *Song of the South* played in theatrical release in the United States, the appearance is notable for the context in which the *New York Times* placed it. The article detailed how the Webster, which originally opened in 1937, managed to survive economically for so long in part because it began screening pornographic films in the mid-1970s. The theater continued this practice until less than a year before *Song of the South*'s reappearance in January 1987. During a Monday matinee on a school holiday, the theater manager claimed, "We had over 150 kids, and that was even with the snow. . . . It was a good matinee." "Youngsters lining up outside the Webster is a far cry from this past summer," the article continued, "when the clientele was virtually all men who came to see movies such as *Sex Capades* and *Young Doctors in Lust*."[72] Juxtaposing a children's film such as *Song of the South* with the pornographic material that usually played at the theater gave the story an added level of humorous irony. Less amusing, however, was that the unnamed snowy January holiday in question was Martin Luther King Jr. Day. The Monday before the article's publication on Sunday was January 19, 1987—the second official observance of the national holiday in honor of the slain civil rights leader. Reagan himself refused for many years to acknowledge the possibility of the holiday, or to sign the bill that would make it official. Eventually, conservatives had to concede to veto-proof numbers in the Democratic-controlled Congress.

At the heart of the Reagan era, this article at the very end of *Song of the South*'s theatrical run is an especially appropriate way to conclude this discussion of the film's relationship to Reaganism. It is disturbingly ironic that children spent MLK Day watching Disney's *Song of the South*. More distressing is that the *Times* didn't even mention this, let alone its historical and cultural significance. Such ignorance, willful or otherwise, was exactly what Snead had been trying to highlight. Race had been erased as a valid way to discuss *Song of the South*, even while there remained a real material impact from such lack of knowledge (e.g.,

children celebrating the holiday of a major civil rights figure by watching one of Hollywood's most resiliently offensive racist texts). As with Reaganism, race was there by not being there, and the history of racial conflict and tension was there by not being there. Critics of *Song of the South* such as Snead and Johnson were on the losing end of a battle with the invisible ubiquity of whiteness. In this *Times* article, race really didn't matter. And, as the next chapter demonstrates, Disney too was finding ways to remove the question of race from *Song of the South*. It could no longer just change perceptions of the film, as its defenders had. It would have to change the film itself.

O N   T A R   B A B I E S

A N D   H O N E Y   P O T S

*Splash Mountain, "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," and
the Transmedia Dissipation of* Song of the South

> *Like ruins, which contain within them the memory of a
> past existence, . . . the meaning of the fragment func-
> tions as nostalgic remnant or emblem of the past, but it
> also reinvents itself as a unique whole that belongs to its
> own time.*
>
> ANGELA NDALIANIS, *NEO-BAROQUE AESTHETICS
> AND CONTEMPORARY ENTERTAINMENT*

In her study of "polycentric" texts in contemporary media,
Angela Ndalianis inverts the hierarchical connotations usually associ-
ated with such transmedia franchises as *Star Wars* (1977), *Jurassic Park*
(1993), and *The Matrix* (1999). Often, films are repurposed through an-
cillary media—television shows, video games, theme park rides, and so
forth. The temptation is to see the other texts as pale imitations, inter-
esting but insufficient copies of the "original." That has often been the
argument—with good reason—about the wide range of texts produced
by the Disney Corporation. Yet, Ndalianis argues, each of the other texts
is no less significant than the film that spawned it. A particular theme
park ride not only expands the narrative universe of its cinematic cousin,
but initiates a reception history all its own. In the 1980s, the full-length
theatrical version of *Song of the South* began to fade from theaters. Nda-
lianis's emphasis on the "unique whole" gains added importance for un-
derstanding how the film endured as Disney's other media "fragments"
took its place.

Despite continued box office success during this decade, the 1980s
symbolically marked the end of the feature-length *Song of the South*'s
visibility. Most notably, Disney stopped distributing it theatrically. More
quietly, isolated fragments of the film—such as "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah"—
took its place. *Song of the South* disappeared into other media formats

Promotional still for Splash Mountain from 1989.

throughout the decade: Disney home video and audiocassette, and such films as *National Lampoon's Vacation* (1983), *Splash* (1984), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), and *Fletch Lives* (1989). This latter presence reaffirmed the film's quiet but considerable ubiquity after forty years of recirculation. Yet, despite the modest acceptance it had acquired relative to its first appearance, the film in many ways was quickly outliving its usefulness to the Disney Corporation. To say *Song of the South* disappeared after 1986 because of its controversial status is accurate, but also

incomplete. By the end of the 1980s, almost *all* old Disney titles began disappearing from theaters. The company shifted its focus to the emergent VHS market for new forms of distribution that, in the short term, were more lucrative. *Song of the South* would not make it to home video formats in the United States, but Disney still kept pieces of the old film around. This involved radically different forms, which meant that Uncle Remus himself was largely left behind.

The most significant of these fragments was the theme park attraction "Splash Mountain," which was based solely on the film's animated sequences. It may appear at first glance foolish to try to reuse *Song of the South* at all, given the cultural issues attached to the film, the considerable financial investment that rides require, and the physical permanence of a theme park attraction. But *Song of the South* was quickly becoming one of the few remaining major titles not yet exploited by the parks in the mid-1980s. Hence, understanding this complicated series of corporate decisions requires understanding Disney's dependence on "branding." Branding is the attempt to use a previously recognizable brand name across multiple media platforms and ancillary markets as a means to sell new products. "Disney" itself is a brand, but so are individual properties within the company. The act of branding has become, writes Paul Grainge, the "lynchpin of a new gestalt of 'total entertainment,' central to a consolidated media moment transforming the status of the motion picture as commodity and aesthetic object."[1] When consumers watch a Disney film, visit a Disney theme park, or buy a Disney toy, they are paying for the presold brand of wholesome, nostalgic entertainment that the name brings with it as much as they are the particular item. And when a new regime took over in the mid-1980s, Disney's brand was in need of revitalization.

Disney had undergone quite a few changes from the late 1960s up to the 1980s. Although the theme parks and rereleases were doing extremely well, few of Disney's new products were making money. After Walt's death in 1966, and Roy's a few years later, the company lost a great deal of its direction and character. But it is also easy to overstate the company's woes in retrospect. Guided largely by Disney disciples such as Cardon Walker and Ron Miller, the company deliberately ran from Walt's image for fear the direct comparison would hurt its present fortunes. Yet the company quietly maintained his existing vision by focusing on rereleasing the classics, making low-budget live action films, exploring the possibilities of television, and investing in the theme parks. This fulfilled the long shift away from groundbreaking animation, which had begun in

the 1940s with World War II propaganda like *Victory Through Air Power* (1943), hybrid animation films like *Song of the South*, and documentaries like *Seal Island* (1948). Disney still made a few animated films through the 1970s and into the 1980s, such as *The Black Cauldron* (1985), but they were no longer the focal point of the company's energies, nor were audiences flocking to see them.

There was no central logic to Disney's business plan other than to continue to do things exactly as they'd always been done. In the post-Walt era, only *The Love Bug* (1969) proved the kind of major box office smash that could match some of the company's earlier successes. Meanwhile, fiascos like *The Black Hole* (1979) symbolized not only Disney's significant theatrical woes but also its lack of creative direction, since the film was basically a knockoff of George Lucas's *Star Wars*. To a point, Disney's difficulties during this era have been sometimes exaggerated by historians anxious to glorify the later innovations of Michael Eisner's leadership. Thanks to the parks, reissues, and low-cost live action films, Disney was treading water throughout the 1970s more than drowning. Nevertheless, Disney's net worth and vast library of existing assets made it an attractive target for hostile takeovers. Such an outcome was avoided, however, when friendly investors such as Sid Bass agreed to outbid the competition and install a new regime of leaders in 1984. This ushered in the "Team Disney" era of Eisner, Frank Wells, and Jeffrey Katzenberg. They mostly came over from Paramount Studios, where Eisner had been hired in 1976 to replace the same man who had dropped *Coonskin*, Barry Diller.

Since Team Disney was rooted in a particular investment in the company's past, its nostalgic vision for the company brand had distinctive implications for *Song of the South*. They are most famous for revitalizing the animation department, which they saw as a cornerstone of the company. Feature-length cartoons offered an endless well of new ideas for merchandising, theme park attractions, and other paratexts. This decision to reinvest in animation led to the phenomenal five-year-run of *Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), and *The Lion King* (1994). More quietly, this period also created another generation of loyal fans. Appealing to Disney's tradition of animation excellence, however, was also built on Team Disney's belief that playing up nostalgia for its studio history was key. They also exploited affection for the company's past by flooding the emergent home video market with VHS copies of old titles from the classic period, such as *Pinocchio* (released in 1985). The previous regime had resisted home video: it pre-

sented copyright concerns and undermined their own lucrative theatrical reissue practices, which the era of the VCR effectively ended. In the short term, however, it was a remarkable economic success.

Song of the South was awkwardly caught up in this new generation of a distinctive Disney brand that celebrated, exploited, but also sanitized the company's past. At the core of all of these decisions was Eisner's embrace of the "Uncle Walt" mythology, and with that the heightening of nostalgia for the perceived glory days of *Disneyland* and the 1950s. Focusing on the studio's history as its central selling point, Team Disney had a particular challenge in rebuilding the brand. The easier part was solidifying a new generation of customer loyalty through the nostalgic use of Disney's preexisting consumer recognition and attachments. In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins has called this emphasis on branding in the modern corporate age "affective economics": "[Media companies] don't simply want to get a consumer to make a single purchase, but rather to build a long-term relationship with a brand. . . . Marketing gurus argue that building a committed 'brand community' may be the surest means of expanding consumer loyalty."[2]

Disney capitalized on affective economics fifty years ago with the spatial and televisual development of Disneyland, as Grainge, Christopher Anderson,[3] and others have argued. They then refined it considerably in the 1980s. This attachment was always deeply affective, writes Grainge, because branding is "a question of the degree to which a product or company can naturalize an emotional relation or set of values."[4] It also depends on customer recognition of the same images, sounds, and stories. This is where even a deeply problematic property like *Song of the South* comes into play. While Mickey Mouse and Walt himself were significant emblems of the Disney brand, its long-term textual universe depended on exploiting the feature-length films whose theatrical presence granted them the greatest visibility. Most everything Disney did began with a movie, and that aspect of the brand served as the glue that held the larger multimedia empire together.

Yet the meanings attached to that same brand can also dissipate through textual variation across the "Disney universe." Like transmedia storytelling and convergence, branding is part of a longer history involving Hollywood's love affair with seriality. Entertainment giants have always tried to repeat, expand, and even revise the experience of popular texts. The primary motivation then and now has been one form of branding or another. It is less about creating a coherent diegetic world and more about finding moderately new ways to resell the same piece of

intellectual property. Scholarship thus far on such polycentric universes has privileged their utopian emphasis on extension—its reach to new audiences, new markets, new media platforms, new stories, and new characters. I wish to propose a space, however, not for expansion, but rather dissipation—*transmedia dissipation*. Old texts remain in an age of media convergence, but dispersed and watered-down. Like Ndalianis, I am not privileging an auratic original text that is lost amid proliferating copies. I am suggesting, rather, that some themes, characters, and story lines migrate more easily than do others. Major corporations can be actively, if quietly, invested in what does and does not survive, and in what forms.

The more "versions" of *Song of the South* across multiple media venues (some more permanent than others), the greater the *risk* involved for Disney in keeping a racist text in circulation. For a while, particularly in an anti–civil rights era, it was easy for the company to continue re-releasing the film every several years. It was always possible—worst-case scenario—to quickly withdraw *Song of the South* from theaters and lock it back up in the Disney vault, where it couldn't threaten the Disney brand through further circulation. Angry letters and frustrated critics aside, there was really little financial risk involved in theatrical releases. But Disney was entering a new distributive period of emergent home video markets and, later, Internet circulation, which both expanded and threatened their tight control. In other words, as *Song of the South* faced the possibility of migrating into home video formats and theme park attractions, a new era of *permanence* emerged. Disney would no longer be able to restrict access to the film if countless video copies were out in circulation. Meanwhile, a major multimillion-dollar theme park ride was taking up a considerable chunk of real estate in the middle of Disneyland.

The result of this changing landscape was that *Song of the South* would have to change. The company limited home video releases to excerpts from the film, and it fundamentally altered the narrative of the film's story in Splash Mountain. Uncle Remus was completely removed, as were the other "real" human characters. The plantation narrative was replaced with a fantastical journey through an ambiguous cartoon bayou. Only Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and Brer Bear, and the songs, remained from the original film. More interesting was the decision to replace the "Tar Baby" in *Song of the South* with a pot of honey as the means through which Brer Rabbit is captured. As Jason Isaac Mauro writes in the strongest critical discussion of Splash Mountain, Disney's decision to erase the Tar Baby "acknowledges that they have structured

the entire multimillion-dollar ride around a narrative that they regard as fundamentally racist."[5] Disney's decision not to release the film any further, for any U.S. markets, and to limit its exposure through other media means, was also such an acknowledgment. While *Song of the South* was still profitable in 1986, it was not a title Disney felt comfortable with in the long term. This is only confirmed by the fact that the film still hasn't been released. The Eisner era of media convergence for Disney was not about reliving the glory days of the 1950s, but rather only about commodifying and rebranding it. It was all about repositioning the company for sustained, future success in a new era of global capitalism. Unlike *Song of the South*, it simply was not possible—physically or symbolically—to put Splash Mountain, once built, back into the Disney vault.

Indeed, the physical nature of the Disney theme parks requires a different method of "textual" analysis—one more closely attuned to how much the body is literally put in motion. Many scholars have noted that these parks, by adapting films into rides, are heavily narrativized spaces. Visitors do not just experience a thrill; they experience a story. In *Remediation*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin discuss how Disney parks were especially effective in remediating older texts (films, songs, and characters) into rides. "By recalling Disney films and their characters," they write, "the parks offer visitors the opportunity to enter into these films either by taking rides that reenact moments of a film . . . or by meeting the incarnations of famous characters from the animated films."[6] Disneyland also offers renewed possibility in excess of those films and narratives. Visitors not only reuse a cinematic or televisual text, but they rewrite it and reexperience it. As Scott Bukatman writes, reenacting a film, *embodying* a film, means something very different from simply watching it.[7] Aside from greater physical space for contingency and the unexpected, the concept of affect takes on a different meaning in the parks. One's whole body is literally immersed, and in transit, in the narrative of a ride such as Splash Mountain.

This chapter focuses on the tension between *Song of the South*'s lingering presence in the 1980s and 1990s, and Disney's careful dissipation of it in a new era of media convergence. *Song of the South* remained a tricky but potentially rewarding brand to exploit, but also a long-term risk to the future-oriented company. I begin by expanding on the question of Disney's new status in the Eisner era and its ambivalent investment in *Song of the South*. Then I will take a closer look at the film's most prominent remediation—the theme park attraction Splash Mountain. It reflected a new version of an old film the company otherwise had no

interest in rereleasing. Using material from the period and from Internet discussions of the ride today, I will look at how Splash Mountain quickly acquired a life of its own in excess of *Song of the South*. Building off that, I then examine how Disney also repackaged the centerpiece song "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" in other media platforms. The Oscar-winning tune continues to circulate in home video "sing-along" collections, compact discs, and digital downloads to this day. Finally, I provide more historical context by exploring other ways in which *Song of the South* lingered in popular culture, including non-Disney films. To a degree, this helps us understand how ubiquitous the film was by the 1980s, and why Disney would be reluctant, or unable, to completely dissociate itself from it. As *Song of the South* disappeared from theaters permanently, Splash Mountain, "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," and other Disney products quietly took its place. They became the fragments, to use Ndalianis's term, that stood in for the whole of *Song of the South* as a corporate asset and as an alternate reception history.

TEAM DISNEY AND CORPORATE RISK

Song of the South changed in the 1980s because Disney changed too. The Uncle Remus film had succeeded through multiple rereleases in part by appealing to nostalgia for the earlier days of the company. The post-Walt, 1970s business model simply repeated that which had always worked. Much of that approach certainly remained in place throughout the 1980s, even after Eisner, Wells, and Katzenberg took the company in new directions. Janet Wasko and Douglas Gomery have each pointed out that it is easy to give too much credit to this new leadership. "They took a company which was underperforming," writes Gomery, "and began to exploit its rich assets during one of the greatest peacetime expansions on record."[8] The new team understood that this Disney brand would be a powerful weapon for dominating new venues for ancillary markets, new opportunities for corporate synergy, and a new generation of cultural ubiquity unparalleled since the emergence of Disneyland in the mid-1950s. While Disney was shrewd enough to create one of the earliest transmedia empires during that earlier period, it had started to slip behind the curve by the 1980s.

Eisner, Wells, and Katzenberg began to exploit the possibilities of building Disney into a multinational corporate empire. One of their key innovations was to both restore and heavily promote the Disney brand

of family values, wholesome entertainment, and nostalgia for simpler times. This commodification of the past was mobilized for the future, as it moved the company into a new era of horizontal integration. While the company had long engaged in cross-promotional projects with others, Team Disney was especially aggressive, as Wasko documents; this included more corporate alliances (AT&T, McDonald's, General Motors, Bank of America, Delta Air Lines, etc.); limiting the exposure of Disney's own financial investment, with others taking on a considerable share of the funding; diversified expansion into ever more markets; and corporate synergy to ensure that more companies and products would carry the "Disney" brand.[9] During this time, Disney also expanded its reach into sometimes quite ambitious examples of convergence, such as building its own planned community in Florida, "Celebration."

But where did this all leave *Song of the South*? On the one hand, it benefited from this nostalgic celebration of the old Disney. But appeals to Uncle Walt were just a marketing ploy, a brilliant means to reinvent the company without changing its core image, and to capitalize on fifty years' worth of consumer nostalgia. Moreover, the new leadership team understood the long-term implications of reusing its intellectual property. Given its success over four decades, there would be a place for *Song of the South*, as with every film locked up in the vault that retained even the slightest bit of remaining worth. Despite its controversies, the film had as much value as any old Disney film, with "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" and the Brer Rabbit children's books. Yet, even amid the Reagan era, there was only so much Disney could continue to do with a 1946 plantation musical. Hence *Song of the South* would be *re*branded, and carefully mined for what potential profit it still possessed. Those excavated fragments would be exploited for their greatest use while the other parts would be quietly left behind. As such, for all its problems, *Song of the South* remains to this day in polycentric form. These were excerpted versions of the film that largely focused on and maximized its affective potential—the songs and animation. And these fragments would take on a reception history all their own.

In the corporate world, the act of branding is about protecting oneself from risk. This is usually meant in the financial sense. The more ancillary markets available for redistributing one piece of intellectual property, the more the same basic formula can be repeated through some form of seriality, the less monetary risk involved in investing in a particular title. The dispersion of an asset across multiple platforms "can be understood not simply as a matter of increasing and exploiting the earning

potential of particular intellectual properties," adds Grainge, "but, more precisely, as a strategy for managing risk."[10] In a transmedia age of careful corporate control over intellectual property, the question of risk can be expanded to include other factors as well. To a certain degree, the Disney family brand of innocence and magic for some people protected *Song of the South* from attacks on its racial imagery, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. There is no question that, for a while, *Song of the South* became *more* defended as Disney's own carefully constructed image as innocuous family entertainment strengthened across the American landscape. In that vein, *Song of the South*'s general theatrical fortunes throughout the 1970s and 1980s profited from Disney's own critical reconstruction as an American institution. As the twentieth century drew to a close and a new era for Disney began, the old Uncle Remus title was now a risk for that same brand from which it had benefited for so long. The biggest gamble in this regard would be Splash Mountain.

"ZIP-A-DEE RIVER RUN" AND THE MARKETING OF THE BODY

Even with its controversy in mind, it is unsurprising that Disney would eventually adapt *Song of the South* into a theme park attraction, as the company had done with every other remotely successful property. Disney theme park attractions distinguish themselves from other amusement parks by focusing resolutely on narrative. Even Tony Baxter, Splash Mountain's lead designer, described the heavily visceral ride as "the closest to literal storytelling that we have."[11] Adapting well-known films and television shows is the easiest way to give a narrative backbone (and preexisting audience) to a thrill ride. Splash Mountain had been on the "Imagineering" drawing board as early as 1983, though it was sidelined at first in favor of another early transmedia project, George Lucas's "Star Tours," a flight simulation ride that expanded the narrative universe of the widely successful *Star Wars* films.[12] Prominent theme park rides are nearly as central to the Disney brand as are feature-length films. Using *Song of the South* at all makes sense given that many of the classic features in the Disney vault had already been remediated into specific physical sites of amusement. After forty years and five theatrical appearances, *Song of the South* had developed a strong cultural ubiquity, deep affective roots with various audiences, and recognizable songs. The ride was even originally called "Zip-a-Dee River Run" in

The cover of a Disney press kit for Splash Mountain's premiere. Note that the drop is most prominent, and there's little direct connection to Song of the South *besides Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit.*

early preproduction. This capitalized on the recognition of the brand's most famous asset, while also removing it further from the original Uncle Remus film.

Disney's investment in Splash Mountain was considerable. It featured an immense physical design and an elaborate mix of water log thrill ride and Audio-Animatronic musical performance, featuring Brer Rabbit and other forest "critters" (most of whom did not appear in *Song of the South* originally). As a result, Splash Mountain was the most expensive ride the company ever built to that point, with a budget rumored to be as high as $80 million.[13] That was nearly as much as *Song of the South* had earned in its combined theatrical appearances up to the late 1980s. The initial financial projections for the budget were so high, in fact, that Disney originally balked at building it. The investment seemed even more daunting given the risk associated with the problematic source material. Therefore, when Disney finally did decide to construct Splash Mountain, it also made the strategic decision to stop rereleasing *Song of the South* to American audiences.

Yet this decision to shelve *Song of the South* wasn't always the case. Only a few weeks after James Snead harshly criticized the last theatrical rerelease of *Song of the South* in 1986,[14] another article in the *Los Angeles Times* announced that Disney was planning to adapt it into a Disneyland ride. Mary Ann Galante's piece offers a rare glimpse into the corporation's initial thoughts on the project, some of which conflict with later events. Galante began by characterizing "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" as a welcome respite from "the haunting melody of the Small World theme song [the notoriously annoying 'It's a Small World']." The article briefly mentioned the film's controversy (though not Uncle Remus), but added that "Disney officials say they do not expect the ride to provoke controversy because it uses only the animated animal characters."[15] While this might suggest a healthy dose of wishful thinking, protest against the ride ultimately was muted. On the heels of sporadic but sustained protests to *Song of the South*'s two popular theatrical rereleases in the 1980s, Disney's decision to remove Uncle Remus and other magnolia myth references probably was perceived as a modest public relations victory after forty years of objections to its depiction of African Americans.

For better and for worse, the focus of Splash Mountain was always the animated products of Uncle Remus's imagination, rather than the man himself. In the *Times* article, Disney claimed to pick *Song of the South* because Brer Rabbit, Brer Bear, and others fit with the theme of "Bear Country," the section of Disneyland where the ride was built. It was later

renamed "Critter Country" to accommodate the new ride thematically. Bear Country, whose only attraction then was the outdated "Country Bear Jamboree," was one of the deadest sections of the park, and Splash Mountain was designed as a high-capacity ride (three thousand visitors an hour) that would ease overcrowding in other sections of Disneyland. A dirty little secret behind the notoriously long lines at theme parks, including Disney's, is that companies want large numbers of people waiting in lines to keep traffic movement throughout the larger park relatively uninterrupted.

Splash Mountain's relationship to its cinematic precedent was not without its own question marks. Disney's public rationale for adapting *Song of the South* to match Bear Country also explicitly deflected attention away from the film itself as a primary motivation. Yet the article foreshadowed how the film did eventually become a liability. According to Galante, Disney's plans for *Song of the South* itself were once quite different: "Al Flores, a Disneyland spokesman, said Thursday that the movie *Song of the South—which he said will probably be re-released when the new ride opens*—was chosen as a theme for the ride because it will fit into the Bear Country theme and *will be a good marketing tool*."[16] Disney explicitly emphasized maximizing the marketability of every possible text in the vault. Yet the film was not rereleased when the ride opened two years later, nor ever again. Moreover, while Disney hoped that preexisting audience attachment to *Song of the South* would play a part in successfully attracting visitors to the ride, the company was careful not to release the film on home video. Also telling was Galante's incidental comment that "no corporate sponsor has been lined up for 'Splash Mountain,' although the park will seek a financial backer for the ride."[17] Sponsors in Disney theme parks are not at all uncommon. From "The Enchanted Tiki Room" (brought to you by Dole Pineapple) at Disneyland and Disney World, to "The Universe of Energy" (brought to you by ExxonMobil) at Orlando's Epcot Center, most rides showcase the names, logos, and even products of the corporations willing to pay for the publicity. Yet no corporation ever agreed to sponsor Splash Mountain, though at least one company, the fast food chain McDonald's, did collaborate with Disney on a cross-promotional campaign.[18] Somewhere during the long process of designing and building Splash Mountain, Disney's attitude toward *Song of the South* changed. The theme park ride was the first Disney text to enact a radically different marketing and distribution strategy for the original Uncle Remus film. Instead of celebrating the source material, Splash Mountain replaced it. While Splash Mountain

proved a popular attraction, the original film from which it was adapted was not ultimately the promotional asset Disney had hoped.

Splash Mountain is a homage to, and expansion of, the animated sequences from *Song of the South*. Disney Imagineers opted to remove all reference to Uncle Remus and the Southern context. But the designers not only confined the ride to Brer Rabbit and his adventures, they also *rewrote* those animated sequences. In one of its most directly deracinated adaptations, the infamous Tar Baby, which trapped Brer Rabbit in the film, was replaced with a pot of honey in the ride. Its bayou backwater vibe matches the water ride "Pirates of the Caribbean," in nearby "New Orleans Square," more than it does *Song of the South*. "Water," generally speaking, is not a central motif or conceit in the Uncle Remus movie. Before setting foot in the hollowed-out log that serves as the vehicle, Uncle Remus's sayings do selectively appear scattered through the queue line as generic, *unattributed* axioms (e.g., "The critters, they was closer to the folks, and the folks, they was closer to the critters, and if you'll excuse me for saying so, 'twas better all around"). These anonymous plaques, however, are the only direct connections remaining to the character himself. This is done in no small part to remove perhaps the most overt signifier of the film's racism. Once on the ride, the visitor careens through a series of dark caverns and lush (fake) plants, both inside and out. Throughout, one is invited to watch Audio-Animatronic versions of Brer Rabbit and others sing new versions of "How Do You Do?" and "Everybody Has a Laughing Place." Only the main characters remain from *Song of the South*—others (such as the dancing cabaret chickens) are simply redressed leftovers from the "America Sings" attraction, which Splash Mountain cannibalized to cut down on production costs.

Looking closely at a theme park attraction, however briefly, requires recalibrating what it means to examine a "narrative." Big differences exist between being a "viewer" and being a "rider." Specifically, the "body" takes on a very different, more overt role in such an analysis. "Although the careful staging of every aspect of the park seems calculated to remind visitors of the media that surround and embrace them," write Grusin and Bolter, "there is an almost contractual promise that the visit will provide an *authentic emotional experience*" through the body's manipulation.[19] While visitors to places like Disneyland are well aware of the park's artificiality, that does not stop the experience from *seeming* real as a bodily sensation. "While it is acknowledged that there is something *more* in these [rides], that 'something' has frequently been tarred or celebrated under the rubric of 'excess,'" writes Scott Bukatman, "these entertain-

ments do not exceed *themselves*, but rather the arbitrary conditions of narrative hierarchical dominance."[20] That excess is not beyond the physical confines of the ride, but rather beyond what is traditionally privileged as its narrative core. While scholars have often focused on Disney's distinctive emphasis on narrativizing its thrill rides, and on maintaining corporate continuity across its multimedia empire, it's difficult to compare the story line of one to the other. The theme parks contain a more all-encompassing conception of "affect."

In an essay on the "Tomorrowland" section of Disneyland, Bukatman highlights how the Disney theme parks were always structured on competing notions of narrative, control, and excess. Disneyland's distinction from earlier amusement parks (from Luna Park to Six Flags) was in its desire to tell a story during the thrill. To ensure that everyone saw more or less the same story, Disney uses elaborate tracks, carefully programmed vehicles, and controlled perspectives to manipulate visitors' physical experience as much as possible. As Bukatman writes, "The [Disney] rides do more than narrate. The combination of simulation and transportation seems to be an urgent part of the agenda. *The body is put in motion in Disneyland, where real movement of the subject's actual body occurs.* . . . You have a body, the rides announce, you exist. The body, and thus the subject, penetrates these impossible spaces, finally to merge with them in a state of kinetic, sensory pleasure."[21] Disney's careful promotion and manipulation of affective potential is common throughout its media kingdom. Yet it is perhaps never more acute, more present, than with the theme park. Here bodily senses are bombarded with music, images, and constant physical motion into a heightened state of sensory overload. In this sense, as Bukatman notes, a ride's emphasis on "narrative" is incomplete and misleading. For example, the movie *Peter Pan* (1953) was remade as a Disneyland ride. Even while the basic story of the movie was still in place in the form of panoramas, part of the attraction was how visitors glided through the air on moving vehicles meant to simulate a flying pirate ship. The thrill of the ride was in the body's physical movement through space—it was the excess beyond the reenacted narrative on display.

The "story" of Splash Mountain is there, but tenuous at best for a casual visitor more invested in staying dry and listening to the music than in learning the story of Brer Rabbit. Throughout, the logs move very fast. It's difficult to take in too much of the narrative. There are a couple of short but steep drops to prepare the visitor for the big "splash" at the end. We are given glimpses of Brer Fox and Brer Bear's attempts

to capture Brer Rabbit. At one point, Brer Bear gets caught in his own trap—one of the few direct references to a scene from the film. As the architecture critic Beth Dunlop broadly describes the ride, "The experience is as much visceral as visual . . . loud, soft, musical, talky, hot, cold, wet, dry, tame, scary—all within the space of a few minutes. The experience comes fast, like in a good movie trailer. The whole thing is as hokey as can be. It's full of caricatures of creatures and nature. Real morning glories entwine a garden fence next to oversized and obviously fake kale and carrots. There are luridly bright colors, improbable tableaux, and funny little voices that chirp, croak, sing, gasp."[22] There's really very little coherent narrative to speak of in Splash Mountain. Eventually, we stumble on a scene depicting Brer Rabbit mixed up with the carefully substituted jar of honey, but there's no explanation of how or why this came to be. Then the ride turns vaguely ominous. One rabbit sings mournfully about Brer Rabbit's fate, oversized talking vultures look down at the visitor, and there is one reference in projected shadow to Brer Fox getting ready to cook Brer Rabbit.

There is clearly an affective shift in tone that's more clearly defined than a shift in story content. Throughout this darkness, the rider begins to ascend a steep ramp, and it's clear one is getting ready for the big, heavily marketed drop. The drop itself is indeed an amazing physical experience. Like most water rides and roller coasters, one feels momentarily weightless, then overwhelmed with gravity, giving way to a plunge into a dark cave. This drop is meant to parallel Brer Rabbit's fall into the briar patch, which saves him from Brer Fox. Aside from a few fake briar bushes above the tunnel, however, one would never know that if they weren't already familiar with *Song of the South* or the Uncle Remus tales. Most often, the visitor thinks about nothing but how wet they just got. The low ceiling is meant to trap the splashed water to make the visitor even more soaked. Then, before the visitor can even get reoriented, the log ride rushes quickly into a final set piece. The whole "cast" of Splash Mountain is waiting to serenade the riders with the much-anticipated chorus version of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah." The song both reorients and reassures the rider after the sensational (yet controlled) chaos of the drop.

This intensely affective experience is carefully staged to create contradictory feelings of both disorder and comfort in the rider. Karal Ann Marling notes that Disney Imagineers specifically wished to make the environment more appealing to visitors, who might be alienated or intimidated by the essential unfamiliarity of the park's spatial dimension.

At the end of the ride, visitors are serenaded with a chorus version of
"Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah." Most of the Audio-Animatronic figures were
reused from the America Sings attraction.

Disney parks are consciously designed to affect reassurance, to gener-
ate a feeling of comfort, invitation, and optimism, while also imposing
rigorous order on the visitor's experience. Marling places this reassur-
ance in dialogue with *control*, contending that through both Disney
manipulates the fan's experience. Unlike strip malls and "real" streets,
"[Disney's] Main Street was aesthetically unthreatening." Marling dubs
this the "architecture of reassurance," where the visitor is "emboldened
and soothed by the clean streets, smiling faces, happy colors, and the
implicit promise that here, at least, everything will be okay."[23] She posits
reassurance as the overcoming of difference, where order is "the best
sensation of all."[24] Control in the theme park is an aesthetic critique of
the disorder and the incoherent lack of a logical design in the surround-
ing consumer world.

   The promotion of sensation has always been part of Disney's attempts
to control their physical space. This was no less a factor in the design
and promotion of Splash Mountain. When Galante later covered the
construction of the ride in 1988, the emphasis was almost entirely on the
technological sophistication and visceral thrills of the ride itself. Rather

than focus on the narrative context of Splash Mountain, she instead highlighted the ride's *affective* potential:

> In Splash Mountain, the thrill comes from the rising, then lurching forward into a 10-minute trip through a splash pond, the old mill and into the briar patch. Patrons will plunge and yaw up and down hills into the "dip drop," "the laughing place" and finally a five-story plunge down into darkness. . . . The flume starts by interrupting the lazy afternoon of a gaggle of geese and an alligator—all Audio-Animatronic characters singing "How Do You Do" from *Song of the South*. As the log boat enters the swimming hole, patrons will see cunning Br'er Fox screaming at a 10-foot-tall Br'er Bear that they've "got to catch a Br'er Rabbit." The rest of the story is basically a 3-D version of the movie, with songs telling that story of how Br'er Rabbit outsmarts Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear.[25]

A chronological description of the ride's mechanics supplemented any clear sense of narrative progression. As part of the ride's debut a year later, Disney released a press kit for Splash Mountain to various media outlets, which included press releases, publicity stills, and a VHS tape with a five-minute video news release (VNR)—prepackaged coverage for the local nightly news. VNRs are a common public relations practice among corporations, intended to control media coverage via the free circulation of prearranged, but deeply propagandistic, "news" footage. The VNR began with a news clip of the "reporter" Tom Perri filing a story from the theme park. The VNR contained a talking head interview with Baxter, footage of the ride (in particular the final plunge and splash), and a few isolated clips from the animated sections. The reporter noted that the ride is based on *Song of the South*, but we see little of the film itself, and absolutely no Uncle Remus.

Just as intriguingly, the remainder of the video clip after the VNR modeled for prospective journalists the various options available to them once they arrived inside Disneyland, if they chose to visit themselves. One was a camera attached to the front of the ride, which could provide either a point-of-view image of the ride ahead, or—reversed on its pivot—an in-the-moment shot of people being splashed. There were also fixed camera positions for live takes of reporters with Splash Mountain in the background; access to editing bays; stock footage of the ride itself; radio

broadcast setups; and a Disney employee on hand at all times to "help with any requests" (not "needs," but "requests"). The on-hand employee was probably less interested in accommodation and more interested in supervising every move the journalist made. The tape provided an overview that gave the appearance that Disney was trying to accommodate journalists. Yet a look beneath the surface revealed not so subtly that the corporation was more intent on controlling every aspect of the journalist's visit to, and coverage of, the ride's premiere.

With the exception of families shooting videos and photographs of their vacation, the Disney parks are private properties that feature tight regulation over their representation. Michael Sorkin argued that the parks were the most tightly controlled private spaces in the United States. "Renowned for its litigiousness," he writes, "the Walt Disney Company will permit no photography without prior approval of its use."[26] The press kit offers a helpful VNR for cash-strapped local news stations, and presents Disney as accommodating to journalist visits. At the same time, Disney dictates what will be shown to local TV audiences about Splash Mountain. There is no question that the Disney company's larger strategy to maintain tight control over its physical space was at work in the promotion of Splash Mountain, and not only as a means to avoid references to *Song of the South*.

DISNEYLAND'S "AUDIENCE"

Even within such tight control, there remains much here in what Bukatman calls "excess." Another way to put this is to consider the question of how visitors actually "receive" the experience of visiting Disneyland in general and Splash Mountain in particular, regardless of how Disney attempts to manipulate their journey. The most famous theoretical work on the parks remains the theorist Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, his prescient observation that this hyperreal Disney space exists to conceal the fact that all of the United States is a simulation.[27] As Michael Billig aptly notes, Baudrillard's conception of Disneyland is curiously "*depopulated*."[28] Not only does the famous French thinker not theorize the "body" in the parks, but he discusses no*body* at all. Just as it is hard to "read" Splash Mountain's narrative, it is difficult to provide an objective, empirical study of how Disneyland visitors negotiate the ride's ideological, affective, and cultural messages.

This is further complicated by doing so from outside the park, long after the immediate experience of the ride.

One attempt is a first-person project, *Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World.* This collaborative effort by Shelton Waldrep, Susan Willis, Jane Kuenz, and Karen Klugman—credited as the "Project on Disney"—recounts their own experiences in the park.[29] Each author writes a different chapter from their own perspective on a particular visit. Some trips were done with other members of the writing group, some were done with their own families, and still others were done in isolation. In all, the goal collectively was to reflect the inherently eclectic everyday experiences that diverse audiences have when visiting Disney World. Theoretically well-informed, and attentive to such issues as control, consumption, and gender, *Inside the Mouse* is more focused on documenting trips to the parks than in offering a larger framework for "reading" Disney World. The result is an intentionally uneven account. For example, the one detailed discussion of Splash Mountain itself by Klugman was not easily amendable to ideological or narrative critique. Instead, it reinforces the overt bodily reception of theme park rides: "Once we [Klugman and her children] were on the ride itself, I pointed out the cute Audio-Animatronics that were cheering us on. I even felt thankful for the visual and auditory cues that evoked admiration for Disney technology, even as they were building suspense for the climax—a brief, but steep descent that would temporarily take my breath away and the memory of waiting in line for forty-five minutes."[30] The account is more about the affect of exhaustion and exhilaration than consciously analyzing the ride. This is not to suggest any historical or cultural ignorance, but to reiterate Bukatman's point that Disney attractions quickly exceed narrative logic and instead become about bodies in motion. Klugman's account reinforces Disney's marketing of Splash Mountain as an intensely visceral experience that will "take [your] breath away" instead of a retelling of *Song of the South.*

Far more than appealing to nostalgia as earlier remediations had, or any another trait directly associated with *Song of the South* (beyond "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah"), this emphasis on overwhelming the visitor was a conscious goal in Disney's promotion of the ride. Splash Mountain fits with a larger motif of thrill ride *drops* throughout the parks—this is a feature of "Splash Mountain," "Space Mountain," "Big Thunder Mountain Railroad," "Matterhorn Mountain," "The Twilight Zone Tower of Terror," among others. In this sense, "Mountain" itself is a part of

the Disney park brand. Disney even promoted Splash Mountain in a press release as part of its "mountain range of thrill rides."[31] While the press release mentioned that the ride was based on characters from *Song of the South,* that wasn't the main selling point: "Unlike Disneyland's other thrill attractions, in which passengers ride roller-coaster style cars on tubular steel tracks, 'Splash Mountain' takes riders on a waterborne journey through backwoods swamps and bayous, and down waterfalls. During their voyage, passengers plunge over the top of a steep spillway, hurtling from the top of the mountain to a briar-filled pond five stories below."[32]

One of the first transmedia attempts to promote the new ride was a July 1989 episode of *The Wonderful World of Disney* on ABC, which featured the mockumentary "Ernest Goes to Splash Mountain." This television sketch, too, emphasized the drop. A popular television and later film character played by Jim Varney, "Ernest P. Worrell" was a comedic act famous for addressing the camera directly as another, always-unseen character named "Vern." Ernest's rise in stardom was short, but immense. He began as an advertising gimmick, then developed his own short-lived children's sketch comedy television program, *Hey Vern, It's Ernest* (1988–1989), and eventually starred in numerous full-length feature films, starting with theatrical releases such as *Ernest Goes to Camp* (1987) and continuing into direct-to-video adventures like *Ernest in the Army* (1998). "Ernest Goes to Splash Mountain" involves Ernest preparing himself physically for the arduous task of riding the attraction—the whole time emphasizing the danger of the final drop. Ernest is presented as the only one brave enough to challenge Splash Mountain. Brief references to *Song of the South*'s animated sequences and other promotions of the ride are spliced between various scenes of his preparation—all leading up to extensive coverage of Ernest actually in the log, riding Splash Mountain. This latter sequence is resolutely uninterested in the "narrative" of the ride, preferring to focus on the drops and on reaction shots of Ernest as he careens through the caverns. After the final dramatic drop, the excessively talkative Ernest is left speechless. After stumbling off the ride at its conclusion, he literally collapses from the sensory overload. The other guests waiting in the queue area do not help him, but instead excitedly trample over him to get on the ride themselves.

Recent Internet descriptions of riders' actual experiences with the thrill ride emulate this reaction. On YouTube, many fans have posted "ride-through" footage of Splash Mountain—first-person amateur footage taken during the ride itself. On these web pages, folks also post

comments about their own encounters with the ride. An overwhelming majority emphasizes the drop itself, the *fearful* anticipation, and getting soaked (or not). "omg i remember my first time on this ride," writes one, "and when we were on the top of the big drop the ride stopped and i was so scared [*sic*]."[33] Adds another anonymous poster, "I used to be soooo afraid of this ride I would panic when we were about to go down the big drop. . . . And I made a huge deal out of it and screamed my head off, while my brother was sitting there calmly."[34] As the Ernest skit foregrounded, the terror of the drop is a big part of Splash Mountain's appeal. Writes another past rider, "i love this ride when i first went on i freaked out then my sis made me ride again and i kinda got used to it then we went on some other rides and then me and my sis came back to this ride at night and no one was on so we rode it 23 times its so much fun" [*sic*].[35]

These responses reiterate that Splash Mountain is ultimately, as Disney intended, about the drop. One such person asked, "I'm a bit of a wuss so how scary are the drops in Splash mountain? Any worse than the ones on Big Thunder Mountain?" [*sic*].[36] Another responded to the query by stating, "The first is the easiest, the second is the worst, and the last one is really fast, so you can't even tell when it happens."[37] Along with the drop is also the fear of getting wet. "I sat in the front," wrote one representative fan, "and was drenched for the whole day!!!"[38] There is surprisingly little commentary, however, on the narrative in the ride. There is at least one amusing instance where a rider thought that Brer Fox ate Brer Rabbit just before the drop[39]—an understandable interpretation that highlights just how ambiguous, and fast moving, the story is within Splash Mountain. Few, if any, comment on the narrative of the ride as its primary appeal. Meanwhile, there are few mentions of *Song of the South*, and virtually no reference, however briefly, to its long history of cultural politics. Fan responses to the ride largely follow the corporate promotional strategy that highlights its affective potential and deemphasizes its cinematic origins.

One of the distinctive differences between theme park rides and two-dimensional audiovisual media like TV and film are the possible, even quite likely, disruptions somewhere in the "storytelling" process. In the *Project on Disney*, the most interesting account of visiting Splash Mountain is when Disney's tight control (momentarily) breaks down. Most of Klugman's account of their trip to Splash Mountain documents not the ride itself, but what unexpectedly happened during their long wait to get on. At one point, Klugman's friend's daughter got her whole leg stuck

between two railings along the queue line, which led to her screaming wildly. Writes Klugman, "It was unclear to everyone whether the child was in pain or having a panic attack, but what slowly took hold of our murky consciousness was that this was an *unprogrammed* event that might require some initiative on our parts. . . . Meanwhile, no one left his place in line to get assistance. . . . It was clear that we were regarded as just another passing 'attraction' [to other waiting riders]."[40] Eventually the two women were able to get her out after about ten minutes, and the exhaustion from that ordeal in part explains why their subsequent encounter with Splash Mountain itself was recounted so superficially. Such "unprogrammed" events happen all the time. A student in one of my Disney courses once mentioned anecdotally in class that he had a particularly annoying experience on the ride. After it broke down, his vehicle was stuck for an extended period of time in the final "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" room, subjecting him to hearing the song repeatedly until the ride was fixed. As another young commenter on YouTube wrote, "omg . . . my bff sami and i went on splash mountain like 4 times but like the 3rd time we went on there was a HUGE, FAT, women in the last seat. man she couldnt get out and she was like stuck, so 3 ppl try to pull her out but at the same time the boat was moving and she was screaming. no! no! no!. man it was the saddest thing like ever!" [*sic*].[41]

Disney parks are focused on controlling every aspect of the theme park experience. People are guided in the right directions (in and out of the ride), vehicles provide the right points of view, audio cues are perfectly in sync with the movement, riders must stay still the whole time (hands and arms kept inside), and so forth. This makes such unplanned moments of interruption all the more jarring. As Klugman later reflected, "My first thought was, 'My God, Disney goofed!' . . . It was a reminder that other details might not have been tested for borderline cases like Charlotte, who had just barely passed the height test for 'Splash Mountain.' Had Disney test-driven the eight-seater logs down the waterfall, for example, with four crash dummies weighing over two-hundred pounds all sitting on the right?"[42]

Another reason that her eventual "reading" of Splash Mountain was so shallow—brief and fleeting like the ride itself—was conceivably because she was doing little except focusing on everyone's safety by the time her entire party of eight people got on the actual ride. Klugman did not perhaps realize the appropriateness of her rhetorical question, "Had Disney test-driven the eight-seater logs down the waterfall?" One of the most famous stories in modern Disney lore involves Michael Eisner and

his desire to be the first one to ride Splash Mountain in 1988. Eisner himself recalled how he and his son, Anders, "were the first humans to try the new attraction, and were nearly decapitated by a board resting across the track on the final drop down the waterfall. I was no longer permitted to talk the construction supervisor into letting me test new rides whenever I felt like it."[43] Less humorous was when one man actually was killed on Florida's version of Splash Mountain in 2000 after he got off the ride midway, fell in the water, and was struck a fatal blow by another trailing log.[44] As recently as 2008, Disney raised the minimum height on the Disneyland version of the ride from forty inches to sixty inches due to concerns that small children were being injured because they had too much room to move around in the vehicle itself.[45] Every aspect of the body, including its size, is central to the theme park visit and to Disney's attempts to control that experience.

On a somewhat lighter note, the most celebrated breakdown of control on Splash Mountain may be the curious Internet phenomenon of "*Flash* Mountain." This notoriously involves women exposing their bare chests during the final drop. As at many other theme parks, cameras are positioned on rides to capture visitors' facial expressions during the most thrilling sequences. The function is to manipulate people into buying a copy of their respective pictures after they exit the ride and see their own comically exaggerated expressions. Splash Mountain is no different—cameras are stationed discretely across from the drop to capture people's amused or horrified faces. At some point in the mid-1990s, it became fashionable for some women to pull up their shirts right as the boat drops and "flash" the camera. Such behavior is not limited only to this ride, but Splash Mountain does have a particular mythology around it for perhaps no other reason than the cleverness of rhyming words. These photos never actually make it to the gift shop where unsuspecting families could see them, since watchful Disney employees screen them all out of sight. Yet, thanks to some of these same diligent workers, these pictures *do* make it to the Internet on a regular basis. In a very literal sense, Flash Mountain exposes Splash Mountain's symbolic focus on the body.

Defying easy categories for reception, the ride highlights how intensely focused Disney parks are on the scripting and promoting of a body's physical motion in space. Many writers on Disney have rightly foregrounded the company's heavy dependence on theme and narrative throughout its parks to distinguish them from competitors. Yet, especially in the case of Splash Mountain, the emphasis on story misses the

heavily visceral experience that the thrill rides are meant to be. In other words, it's difficult to "read" Splash Mountain's retelling of *Song of the South* since the ride is designed to completely, if momentarily, engulf the senses of the visitor. This doesn't make the ride any less ideological, as I will discuss below. But it does suggest that one is often consciously overwhelmed in the heavily controlled, but often viscerally incoherent, affective chaos that is a Disney theme park attraction.

DISNEY'S NATIONAL ANTHEM

The song heard in [Splash Mountain's] finale, "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," has, over the years, become something of a Disney national anthem.
DISNEY PRESS RELEASE

While Splash Mountain was unquestionably the most prominent and permanent "official" corporate version of *Song of the South*, it was far from Disney's only reuse of the aging intellectual property. Disney repackaged the sensory overload thrill ride in tandem with the most powerfully affective remaining element of *Song of the South*— its songs. That Splash Mountain was originally named "Zip-a-Dee River Run" is not incidental. In its early preproduction stages, Disney Imagineers incorporated the classic tune as the ride's key selling point. Splash Mountain stripped the old Disney film down to its most useful parts— the colorful animated creature characters and the Oscar-winning tunes. By the end of the 1980s, Disney believed that this one song, and its close relationship with the larger Disney brand, was ultimately the only significant property worth salvaging from *Song of the South*. In fact, much of the company's continued use of the film can be reduced just to the recirculation, in different platforms, of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah."

This was consistent with its larger corporate strategy of remediation. As early as Donald Duck's *Soup's On* (1948), Disney had been finding often-subtle ways to incorporate "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" into other company products. In 1984, Disney's "adult-friendly" distribution label, Touchstone, was founded so that the studio could release non-G-rated films. Touchstone was created to expand, but also inoculate, the Disney brand. They could market films to a more adult audience without attaching the official "Disney" name to them. This is the label, for instance,

that released *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988). Its first film, *Splash*, featured a scene where Tom Hanks sings "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" to himself while making breakfast. Here Disney used cross-references to position the song as a "routine" part of everyday life. There is also the rumor that Eisner wanted the ride called "*Splash* Mountain" to help promote the Hanks movie, though the movie and theme park attraction otherwise share nothing in common.[46] *Splash*'s intertextual reference to *Song of the South* both reflected and perpetuated the song's appeal.

Nor was the value of the song lost on others. In May 1980, a man by the name of Judge E. Peterson sued Disney for $10 million in royalties, claiming that he—along with James A. Payton—were the real authors of *Song of the South*'s highly lucrative centerpiece song. Peterson claimed that the song was stolen in 1939 by a "'long-forgotten impresario' of a Washington theater chain . . . [who then] eventually 'laundered and converted' the true authorship until it was sold to Walt Disney."[47] Meanwhile, others laid claim to the song, sometimes in odd ways. Shortly after the film's final rerelease in 1986, a thirty-five-year-old man named Gary Eugene Duda in DeKalb County, California, went to court to legally change his name to "Zippidy Duda," after having been called "Zippidy most of his life by friends and family after the tune."[48] According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Disney did not attempt to block him from doing so. It was less clear, however, if he was doing this because he was a devoted fan of the film, or if it was because "Duda, a wholesale jeweler, said he thinks the name change will help business." Ultimately, any clear distinction between fandom and incidental opportunism was lost over the thirty-plus years of having being nicknamed after the Disney film's most famous song.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" appeared more often than did *Song of the South*. The company began circulating recycled "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" footage as part of the second volume of its *Disney's Sing Along Songs* VHS tapes (1986). The collection mixed a sequence from the film with a compilation of classic excerpts from other older Disney titles, such as *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), and *Snow White* (1937). This use of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" was done to take advantage of the emergent home video market. It also promoted the last theatrical rerelease of *Song of the South* and eventually the debut of Splash Mountain. Another *Song of the South* musical sequence, "How Do You Do?," was later included in the eleventh volume of *Disney's Sing Along Songs* (1992). The long-term popularity of these compilations, new

An early VHS copy of Disney's Sing Along Songs, *circa 1986.*
Although Uncle Remus and other "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" characters
are included on the cover, only this one sequence from Song of the
South *is included on the tape. This is as close to rereleasing the film*
on U.S. home video as Disney ever got.

volumes of which thrive on DVD to this day, represents one of many suc-
cessful ways—like *Disneyland* and *The Wonderful World of Disney*—that
Disney repackaged the same material for added profit.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the video store. Over the
next decade, volume 2 of this profitable series also came literally to take

the place of a hypothetical *Song of the South* home video release in U.S. markets.[49] *Disney's Sing Along Songs* became the company's way of exploiting the film *without actually using* almost any of the film itself. That this product was a substitute for *Song of the South* was most strikingly exhibited by the tape's front cover, which featured the title "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" and a picture of Baskett and the film's moles. One version even includes the words "*Song of the South*" in bold lettering. This works to give the impression, upon a quick glance, of being the official VHS copy of *Song of the South*, even though only four minutes of the half-hour program are from the old plantation movie. To this day, many would-be consumers on Amazon have complained in the comments section that this Disney release gave the disingenuous impression of being the complete *Song of the South*.[50] This particular volume was subsequently released multiple times with several different layouts, but each featured Baskett and the song title on the cover. The tape was quietly discontinued in the pre-DVD era of the mid-1990s, but various used copies remain easily accessible.

The song itself was also released later in *another* volume of the popular sing-along home video series, titled "Disneyland Fun" (1990), which substituted footage of people riding Splash Mountain and other rides for
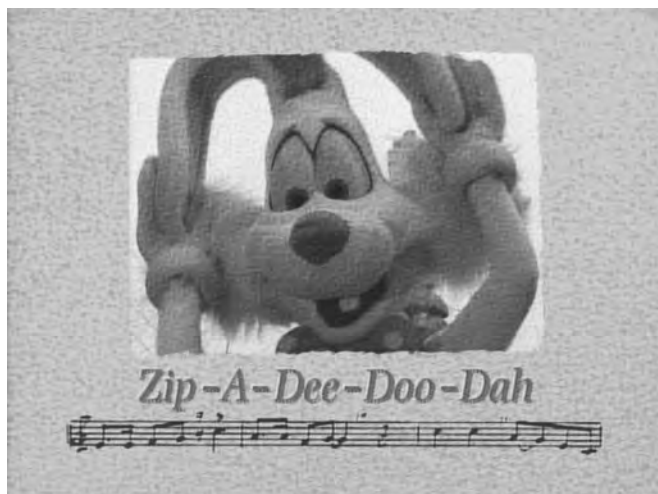
A later volume of Disney's Sing Along Songs, *"Disneyland Fun" (1990), was able to promote both* Who Framed Roger Rabbit *and "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," in addition to the theme park. In the clip, Roger is afraid to go on the thrill rides with the children.*

The version of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" on "Disneyland Fun" featured footage from several thrill rides in Disneyland, not just Splash Mountain. This Sing Along Songs *version further removed any direct connection between the song and the original film.*

clips from *Song of the South*. This not only literally removed *Song of the South* from the song, but also helped promote Disney's newest theme park attraction. "Disneyland Fun" also featured a new chorus recording of the song, where some lyrics were changed to reference such ride-specific features as going down waterfalls. As far back as Johnny Mercer's hit cover in 1947, many versions of the Oscar-winning song do not feature Baskett's original recording. With its new version of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" and fresh footage from the Disney parks, "Disneyland Fun" spoke to the company's successful attempt at *completely* remaking the song, removing almost all other references to *Song of the South*. Hence it is unsurprising that this *Sing Along* version, unlike the earlier one, *did* survive well into the era of DVD, having been rereleased as late as the fall of 2005.

Home music platforms, meanwhile, were just as crucial in Disney's continued, carefully selective recirculation of *Song of the South*. The popular audiocassette and later CD collections *Classic Disney* (1995) and *Disney's Greatest Hits* (2001) made great use of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" and other *Song of the South* tunes. Like the *Disney's Sing Along Songs* videos, these albums recycled content from earlier films by compiling the most famous songs. Released as a series of five separate volumes be-

tween 1995 and 1998 (and then rereleased as one box set in 2002), the *Classic Disney* albums appeared on cassette and CD, and featured the audio recordings of several *Song of the South* tunes along with countless other Disney songs. In addition to repackaging "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," this collection also recycled "Everybody Has a Laughing Place" on volume 2 and the title song, "Song of the South," on volume 5. Then, starting in 2001, Disney released many of the same songs again in a new series called *Disney's Greatest Hits*, volume 1 of which again reused "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah." But the continued recycling of Baskett's original version is only the beginning of Disney's exploitation. There are numerous "authorized" covers of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," such as the R&B singer Patti Austin's version, which was released on the album *Disney's Music from the Park* (1996), or the version by Miley Cyrus, aka "Hannah Montana," which appeared on the album *Disneymania 4* (2006). The song's presence throughout the Disney empire is impossible to map fully today. In all these VHS tapes, DVDs, cassettes, and CDs, the company literally recirculated *just* "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," without the other, more overtly problematic material that originally surrounded it. This extensive repackaging reiterates just how much "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" certainly was, and remains, the most valuable asset for Disney to come out of *Song of the South*.

"ZIP-A-DEE-DOO-DAH" AND THE CURIOUS CASE OF CHEVY CHASE

Even back in the 1980s, the omnipresence of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" in American culture extended far beyond the direct textual reach of the Walt Disney Company. The road-trip comedy *National Lampoon's Vacation* (1983) made direct reference to singing "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah." An homage to Route 66 culture and road trips, *Vacation* is the comedic story of a Chicago family, the Griswolds, who drive cross-country to visit the fictitious "Walley World" in Southern California—a thinly veiled reference to Disneyland. This connection is made more explicit when the Griswolds sing the "Walley World" anthem, which sounds nearly identical to "The Mickey Mouse Club," down to spelling out the main character's name. The original short story that *Vacation* is based on, John Hughes's "Vacation '58," was literally about a family's road trip to Disneyland. It featured the particularly memorable opening line, "If Dad hadn't shot Walt Disney in the leg, it would have been our

best vacation ever!"[51] The short story, unlike the film, ends with Clark incarcerated after shooting Walt at his Beverly Hills home as the legendary entertainer attempts to flee.

Like its literary source, *Vacation* is the comedic account of the American road trip from hell. If anything can go wrong, it will. This includes visiting tacky Wild West amusements, staying at dirty campgrounds, losing luggage, stealing money from a hotel, killing the family pet, strapping a dead relative to the car roof, and breaking into Walley World at gunpoint. At the morbidly comical low point of the road trip in Arizona, the family drops off the body of a deceased aunt at her son's vacant home, so they won't lose time on the drive. When other family members suggest just going home, the father, Clark Griswold (Chevy Chase), profanely lashes out: "We're ten hours from the fucking fun park, and you want to bail out. Well, I'll tell you something: this is no longer a vacation. It's a quest. It's a quest for fun. I'm going to have fun, and you're going to have fun. We're all going to have so much fucking fun, we're going to need plastic surgery to remove our goddamn smiles. We'll be whistling 'Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah' out of our assholes." "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" is used as a direct point of reference for the Disney brand of family fun. In his early forties, Griswold is clearly a baby boomer, an allegorical child of the *Mickey Mouse Club* and *Davy Crockett* generation. Raised by television to see Disney as a consumerist mecca of all things entertaining, he is unable to abandon his "quest for fun." He believes—living out the middle-class utopian dream that *Disneyland* constructed in the 1950s—that a visit to the theme park will make life all better. This suburban generation's ambivalent fascination with Disney is often tied up with, as Disney had hoped, the ritualistic centrality of the family road trip experience.

Vacation's contradictory appeal is both attributable to, and a critique of, nostalgia for a white, postwar, middle-class Disney childhood embodied in the character of Clark. While his family's "quest for fun" is an attempt at recapturing those childhood memories with parents and siblings, his verbal blowups highlight the impossibility of such a return to his childhood. In a rare moment of honesty late in the movie, he admits to his son, Rusty, that he "never had fun" during all those trips to California as a child. His own family's road trip becomes a failed attempt to live out a childhood he never quite experienced himself. He was nostalgic, using Svetlana Boym's definition, "not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been."[52] *Vacation* tapped into a

The all-white plantation in Fletch Lives, *as Fletch (Chevy Chase) sings "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," complete with the animated bluebird on his shoulder. Its sense of parody is muddled at best.*

particular moment of nostalgia among the baby boomer generation for Disney culture.

While the film makes no direct reference to *Song of the South* or Disney, the reference to "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" reiterates how, by the early 1980s, the song had become Disney's "national anthem." It was a shorthand signifier for the corporation and its brand of "family fun" for many middle-class American families. On an allegorical level, *Vacation* is clearly about the twentieth-century ritual of road trips to Disneyland (and about the televisual culture of leisure that *Disneyland* helped to create). At the same time, the Oscar-winning song is foregrounded in excess of the movie itself, marginalizing *Song of the South* at the very same moment that its memory was invoked.

Other films in the 1980s referenced *Song of the South* much more explicitly, through direct visual and aural cues. One such example was another Chevy Chase film, *Fletch Lives* (1989). In this film, a sequel to the successful investigative reporter comedy *Fletch* (1985), the title character inherits a plot of land in Mississippi from a deceased aunt. On the flight from Los Angeles to investigate the property, Fletch dozes off and daydreams about what life will be like in the South. In the sequence, Fletch imagines himself dressed as a Confederate colonel, drinking mint julep, and surrounded by hundreds of white plantation workers. Specifically,

a few of them are acquaintances from L.A. whom he doesn't like, but the remaining are all generic white characters. When one worker asks Fletch if he'd like to see the field hands dance for his amusement, Fletch responds, "Why, I'll dance for them!" At this point, the entire cast breaks out into a Broadway-style rendition of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," complete with the obligatory animated bluebird to match the lyrics. An animated dog comes to Fletch's side, further mimicking the look of *Song of the South*'s hybrid animation.

Comic references to Disney linger throughout *Fletch Lives*. As Peggy Russo noted in her discussion of the film, "Admittedly, the dream sequence is designed to call up stereotypical images of an idyllic plantation world to be overturned later . . . but the fact remains that the stereotype follows Disney's Remus."[53] When Fletch arrives in Mississippi, he discovers that the plantation is a run-down dump with only one African American helper (Cleavon Little), who turns out to be an undercover FBI agent. They are both investigating a local televangelist, with a massive media empire and biblical-themed amusement park, whom Fletch at one point calls "some deranged Walt Disney." The "American South" Fletch actually encounters hardly matches the magnolia myth perpetuated by films such as *Song of the South* and *Gone with the Wind*. Instead, it is filled with rednecks, dim-witted police, KKK members, and so forth. The film replaces one cinematic stereotype of the region with its extreme opposite.

In both of these films, the intensity of *Song of the South*'s original controversies slowly dissipates. *Fletch Lives* was an apolitical pastiche of the old Disney film and Hollywood's representation of the South in general. As such, it failed to mount a coherent critique of the era's racial politics. If anything, it ultimately took the problematic position that race did not matter. Even the extremist KKK members are portrayed comically in the film—too stupid and incompetent to be any real threat. Like *Vacation*, *Fletch* presents an apolitical kind of populism that serves as a default form of conservatism because it fails to criticize that which it imitates (Disney's idyllic vision of the American South). As with Reaganist responses to *Song of the South* during the same decade, these carefully apolitical nods to the Disney film ultimately work to reinforce the *everyday*, *evasive* ubiquity of whiteness. The musical sequence, where the emphasis is on using white performers to avoid any racial connotation about the history of the South, just reinscribes whiteness as the norm. At the end of the film, Fletch tricks another man back in L.A. into taking the worthless Mississippi property. Fletch pretends to be heartbroken, say-

ing he was "born and raised in a briar patch." At this point, *Fletch Lives* references *Song of the South* again, but it also invokes a subtler truth. Fletch's deception fits the reference to Brer Rabbit, who repeatedly lied and tricked Brer Fox. But Fletch's own kinship with Brer Rabbit also echoed one of the criticisms of *Song of the South*. The lessons of Brer Rabbit were no longer about the physical and emotional survival of African Americans in racially hostile climates. Instead, they were for privileged white children to learn how to trick less-privileged white children to their advantage.

WHO (RE)FRAMED BRER RABBIT?

Two years after *Song of the South* was rereleased for the final time, Touchstone co-released with Amblin Entertainment the cartoon noir *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Another landmark in hybrid animation, *Roger Rabbit* is the story of a fictional animated star, "Roger Rabbit," who is framed for the murder of a man thought to be having an affair with his wife, Jessica Rabbit. Roger is a mix of Bugs Bunny, Mickey Mouse, and Oswald the Rabbit. In this alternate history of classic Hollywood, all the stars of animated cartoons are actually actors who coexist in Southern California with real people, but are largely segregated to the

Who Framed Roger Rabbit *was a who's who of classic Hollywood cartoons, including even Brer Bear (far left).*

"Toontown" neighborhood. *Roger Rabbit* is set in 1947, one year after *Song of the South* debuted. Also a hybrid of animation and live action, the later film—budgeted at the considerable cost of $50 million[54]—was every bit as innovative for its time as *Song of the South* had been forty years earlier.

The film's release prompted many references in the press to the earlier Disney film. Journalists and critics positioned *Roger Rabbit* within a long historical timeline of technological innovation and achievement that began with Max Fleischer's *Out of the Inkwell* series and Disney's *Alice's Wonderland*, followed decades later by *The Three Caballeros* (1944), *Anchors Aweigh* (1945), and *Song of the South* (1946), where "as Uncle Remus, James Baskett seemed to walk into a cartoon world."[55] Such a technological correlation between the two films, centered on groundbreaking advances in the blending of live action and animation, was apparent enough. Yet the link was not only a matter of mutual industrial innovation. Featuring an "all-star" cast of Hollywood's animation legends (Disney, Warner Bros., Fleischer), *Roger Rabbit* also included direct *Song of the South* cameos—Brer Bear appears in two separate scenes, along with the singing moles from "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," and—in a split-second shot late in the film—the infamous "Tar Baby" (who holds a sign that reads "Visit La Brea Tar Pits," a silly non sequitur that deflects potential controversy through winking humor).

Of course, the fantastical pastiche of characters and Hollywood history in *Roger Rabbit* was not an exception to the rule, but rather a typical

A very brief shot of the Tar Baby in the "Toontown" sequence of Roger Rabbit, *obscured behind the window of Eddie Valiant's car. His sign reads "Visit La Brea Tar Pits."*

The "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" moles in Roger Rabbit.

Another distant sighting of Brer Bear in Roger Rabbit, *as he walks up the road in the distance.*

attempt to expand Disney's narrative landscape across various texts. The subtle reappearances of characters in *Roger Rabbit* suggests an earlier instance of "transmedia storytelling"—Henry Jenkins's notion for how preexisting diegetic spaces spill over into additional media texts. Indeed, every character here (Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, and so forth) is expanding their narrative canvas via their presence in this film. The extent of this transmedia migration was reinforced less than five years later, when *Roger Rabbit*'s "Toontown" debuted as a new themed section of California's Disneyland, giving physical embodiment to the film's fictional "ghetto." Toontown's centerpiece attractions are Mickey Mouse's own home and a ride featuring Roger Rabbit. The narrative world of

Roger Rabbit literally links up spatially with *Song of the South*'s Splash Mountain, built only a few hundred yards away. In a circular transmedia pattern, *Song of the South* characters exist in *Roger Rabbit*, which exists in Disneyland as "Mickey's Toontown," which then links back up, across Frontierland and into Critter Country, to Splash Mountain.

As I have noted throughout, these acts of corporate convergence are never politically, economically, or culturally neutral. Patricia Turner has explored explicitly the problematic representation of race in *Roger Rabbit* and *Song of the South*. In *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies*, Turner critiqued *Song of the South* as part of a larger chapter on Disney's damaging representations of race, articulating academic criticisms of the film common during the 1980s and early 1990s. While not discussing the presence of *Song of the South*'s characters in *Roger Rabbit*, she drew a comparison between the two landmark achievements. "Brer Rabbit was not the last hare to command center stage in a Disney-related production . . . ," she wrote. "Both productions broke new technological ground in weaving live-action sequences with animated ones."[56] More important, Turner drew out the implicit yet clearly racial subtext of *Roger Rabbit*: "The Los Angeles community imagined by the filmmakers consists of two communities—one human and one animated. It goes without saying that humans are depicted as the superior, dominant population, and the animated characters, the toons, are portrayed as the inferior, subordinate community. In assigning characteristics to depict toon inferiority to the audience, the filmmakers bestowed upon them several attributes traditionally associated with blacks."[57]

Turner argued that the "toons" are an idealized minority community—their primary motivation being the entertainment of others, acceptance of their social status, and constant approval of humans to define their own self-worth. She also convincingly shows how Roger Rabbit himself evokes the African American "coon" stereotype—a harmless buffoon who only exists for a laugh. Moreover, "the nightclub where Jessica works as a singer bears strong resemblance to Harlem's infamous Cotton Club where black performers entertained all-white audiences," she wrote. "In *Roger Rabbit*, all of the entertainers are toons while all of the patrons are humans."[58] This reading may be overlooking one of the film's clearest racial signifiers—the use of *Dumbo*'s (1941) racist crows as the jazz band playing behind Jessica Rabbit in the club. This clever insertion, and the larger narrative of segregation, begs the bigger ideological question of whether the filmmakers were aware of the racial histories the film evoked. Was the racial subtext in *Roger Rabbit* the unconscious

A brief, clever reference to Splash Mountain, *as Roger Rabbit and Baby Herman go over a steep drop in the short film* Trail Mix-Up *(1993). A bumper sticker on the back of the log reads "We Visited Splash Mountain."*

by-product of white privilege (where all nonhumans become conflated into one generic "other"), or was it the result of a subversive sense of historical irony?

   Roger Rabbit's symbolic representation of racial relations is clearly ambivalent. The greatest strength and weakness of Turner's argument is that she articulates *Roger Rabbit*'s allegory quite acutely—in fact, it's barely a subtext. Much of the film's retro-noir is a reference to Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), another film about racially segregated neighborhoods. *Roger Rabbit*'s private eye protagonist, Eddie Valiant (Bob Hoskins), is haunted by a tragedy from working a beat in Toontown—"A toon killed my brother." This satirically echoed the more ambiguous, but more powerful, "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown." While clearly a reference to ethnic enclaves, "Toontown" is as much "Chinatown" as it is "Watts." All of this isn't to suggest that Turner's argument does not work. It would be foolish to argue that the filmmaker's intentions were the definitive reading of *Roger Rabbit*. Like *Fletch Lives*, its cultural and historical sense of irony is passive at best. By remaining only an allegory, the symbolic narrative of racial inequality is ultimately tenuous. The film may reward the informed viewer, who appreciates the multiple intertextual references. Yet *Roger Rabbit* could just as easily reinforce issues of white privilege

and institutional racism with audiences uninformed, or uninterested, in its ironies.

Song of the South is one of many texts to which *Roger Rabbit* pays homage. By alluding to that earlier film, by internalizing *Song of the South* characters in a larger animated world, *Roger Rabbit* also conceals a film of which it can never be free. Continuing Disney's recirculation of profitable intellectual properties, the character of Roger Rabbit himself reappeared in additional animated shorts in subsequent years, such as *Rollercoaster Rabbit* (1990) and *Trail Mix-Up* (1993). He even appeared in the "Disneyland Fun" sing-along version of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah." In *Trail Mix-Up*, Roger at one point rides a log from a lumber mill over a steep waterfall. The implicit reference to Splash Mountain's log ride is quickly made explicit. As Roger and Baby Herman go over the ledge and down the drop, the back of the log reveals a bumper sticker that reads "We Visited Splash Mountain" (the use of a bumper sticker also recalls Disneyland's presence in highway culture). Like Splash Mountain, which was conceived around the same time as *Roger Rabbit*, these strategic reuses of *Song of the South* both expand and conceal the possibilities for exploring racial attitudes that the original Uncle Remus film continues to activate through its dispersed presence.

As *Trail Mix-Up* suggests, Splash Mountain's presence and popularity extends far beyond the ride itself, especially as we move into the realm of modern gaming. In 2000, a Splash Mountain–themed game was included in the *Walt Disney World Quest: Magical Racing Tour* for PlayStation and other videogame platforms. In this version, the user plays as Mickey Mouse or one of several other Disney characters as they race on boats through a somewhat ambiguous virtual simulation of the ride's environment (no characters or music from the ride itself are prominently featured). Several years later, Splash Mountain was featured in its own old-fashioned board game, *Sorry! Splash Mountain* (2005), part of a series of several games based on Disney theme park attractions. Most recently, Splash Mountain appeared prominently in Xbox 360's *Kinect Disneyland Adventures* (2011). Like all Kinect games, *Disneyland Adventures* is an interactive, physical experience that works through a motion sensor device that allows the gamer to play hands-free. In the Splash Mountain portion of the game, people are able to join with Brer Rabbit as he runs through the Briar Patch, and then in a boat as he paddles down the river. In both stages, completion of the game is dependent on the gamer physically completing the same tasks as Brer Rabbit. Befitting the innovation in computer graphics and high-definition imagery, *Disney-*

land Adventures' re-creation of Splash Mountain is far more detailed and sophisticated than that of *Magical Racing Tour.* Halfway through the game, meanwhile, there is also a new animated sequence featuring Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and Brer Bear. In this regard, *Disneyland Adventures* is by far the most extensive use of *new Song of the South*–related footage since the film was last seen in theaters. It is also the most elaborate use of digital animation to re-create Brer Rabbit and the other characters. Both developments suggest *Song of the South* not only quietly lives on in fragments, but perhaps has benefited from the emergence of digital culture as much as any old Hollywood film.

WHITENESS AND THE TRANSMEDIA DISSIPATION OF *SONG OF THE SOUTH*

This chapter has focused on the diverse ways in which Disney directly and indirectly negotiated the continuing risk associated with *Song of the South* during the Eisner era. Embracing the value of the studio's long history to its present economic fortunes, Disney could not simply toss the old film aside in the mid-1980s. *Song of the South* continued to draw decent crowds to theaters, while its Oscar-winning song, "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," had emerged as a central pillar of the Disney media empire, on par with visions of Mickey Mouse and Uncle Walt. Yet the image-savvy Team Disney that now led the company was also mindful of how much a racist old plantation movie threatened their family-friendly brand. The fact that Disney supporters within the generally conservative political climate of the 1970s and 1980s had defended *Song of the South*'s critical reputation was only a short-term business solution. All of this came to a head when Disney made the long-term investment to turn *Song of the South* into a costly and more permanent theme park attraction. The 1946 film would be mined for its remaining value to the company, which they found in the music and the animated characters. The rest would be quietly put away.

Transmediated fragments of *Song of the South* continue to appear everywhere throughout Disney's media universe. In addition to the versions of Splash Mountain in California, Florida, and Japan, direct traces of the film populate sing-along videos, compilation CDs, video games, and a wide range of other merchandise lines. Brer Rabbit himself is available in the form of plush toys and porcelain statues. Meanwhile, "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" is so deeply engrained within Disney's media landscape

of theme parks, videos, CDs, and television shows that its presence is nearly impossible to capture. The hit tune that preceded *Song of the South* on the pop charts back in 1946 has now outlived the film. "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" is perhaps the only part of *Song of the South* that most audiences instantly recognize, although the association is more often with Disney's fun-loving corporate image than with the tales of Uncle Remus. It has showed up in numerous non-Disney texts—everything from films such as *National Lampoon's Vacation*, *Fletch Lives*, and *Overboard* (1987), to the short-lived television show *Galactica 1980* (1980). By the 1990s, *Song of the South* had not disappeared; it simply dissipated throughout a universe of paratexts that had quietly replaced it.

The complicated histories of racial difference and inequality that *Song of the South* evokes dissipated along with the film itself. It is unfair to imply that any of the texts examined in this chapter are as potentially offensive as the film they strategically remediated, even if they benefited from aspects of *Song of the South*'s popularity. Criticisms of Splash Mountain, for example, seemed muted when the attraction opened. A 2002 article in the *Alabama Mobile Register* made reference to NAACP "protests against a Disneyland attraction with a '*Song of the South*' theme a few years ago,"[59] yet little evidence corroborates what these "protests" against Splash Mountain were. By the end of the 1980s, critics of *Song of the South* may have seen Splash Mountain's considerable narrative revision as a small victory, especially so soon after the film's latest rerelease. Even James Snead wrote in 1986 that the live action parts were the most offensive aspect of *Song of the South*—and they were nowhere to be seen in Splash Mountain, other than via a few unattributed quotations from Uncle Remus.

Yet it is also excessive to glorify Disney's corporate strategies of minimizing risk as the definitive solution to a thorny subject. Instead, the film's dispersed textual presence speaks to the awkward existence *Song of the South* continues to maintain in American culture. Likewise, the discourse of whiteness, the denial of anything other than white culture, remains stubbornly persistent in the media. In the "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" sequence from *Fletch Lives*, the shift to an all-white plantation symbolizes the ways that Disney and most every over major Hollywood studio in the 1980s avoided issues of race by often going so far as to deny even the representation of racial difference. When the designers of Splash Mountain changed the "Tar Baby" to a pot of honey, the move heightened the film's core racism at the same moment of its erasure. Yet this is also lost

on the Disneyland visitor whose only concern is surviving the fifty-foot drop that awaits him or her.

The decision to change *Song of the South* conceded its problematic aspects, and the ride's continued existence always retains the potential to bring back the ghost of Uncle Remus. The deliberate avoidance of *Song of the South*'s overtly racialized content in *Fletch Lives*, as well as in Splash Mountain, *Kinect Disneyland Adventures*, and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, reinforced a post-racial logic that supports the norm of whiteness precisely by ignoring persistent questions of race. These texts do not avoid issues of race so much as they train their respective audiences *not to see racial difference* in any meaningful way. Disney tried to wipe its hands clean of Uncle Remus and Johnny. Yet, with the rise of the Internet, neither *Song of the South* nor questions of racism were going anywhere in a new age of participatory culture.

New Media, Nostalgia, and the
Internet Fandom of Song of the South

Of course the film is available if you don't mind infring-
ing on Disney's copyright by buying an illegal bootleg
copy whose quality will not be perfect. . . . When one of
these discs came into my possession I put it in my player.
But even before the credits had finished rolling I turned
it off, not because of the quality of the audio and video,
which wasn't sparkling, but certainly good enough. I
guess I didn't want to experience the disappointment an
adult sometimes feel [sic] *when they revisit the scenes of*
his childhood. Or maybe I was afraid of the long-buried
emotions the film might dig up.
BILL VAUGHN

      With its last theatrical appearance now nearly thirty years past, and with no full-length home video versions ever released in the United States, it is tempting to talk of *Song of the South* in the past tense. A fan petition for its rerelease in 2007 was resisted by Disney, which said proper historical context would need to be included. "That was a polite way of saying," wrote Earl Hutchinson then, "that there was no way that such a racially anachronistic film loaded with racially demeaning images and characters can be peddled without telling how and why the images and message are racially insulting today."[1] The official company line is that "Walt Disney Home entertainment uses many factors to evaluate which movies in its rich library will be issued on video and DVD formats. . . . To this point, we have not discounted nor committed to any distribution window concerning this *title*."[2] In this instance, Disney was unwilling to even state the title, *Song of the South*.

  Yet any notion that *Song of the South* has truly vanished is problematic. As Lucas Hilderbrand argues, there remains a whole history of me-

dia reception to be explored by looking past "official" releases, and taking up the equally ubiquitous universe of bootleg ones.[3] Despite Disney's official stance, *Song of the South* is relatively easy to find. These versions are often illegally recorded from the various VHS and laser disc versions Disney sold for decades in Europe and Asia. Personal anecdotes of its survival abound. The media scholar J. P. Telotte recently recalled stumbling on bootleg copies of *Song of the South* that were openly displayed in a gift shop in northern Georgia.[4] Scott Schaffer, a former Disneyland employee, once mentioned in a footnote to an article on the theme parks that "I have recently been asked—by a current Disney employee—to send copies of [*Song of the South*] to the United States from my residence in Toronto."[5] Moreover, the film is regularly distributed online through file-sharing services such as BitTorrent. The original feature-length film is not hard to come by today, since Disney fans and the passing curious have embraced the bootleg as key to *Song of the South*'s (illegal) survival.

Digital culture has radically shifted audiences' collective relationship to *Song of the South* in ways that Disney could not have anticipated when they built Splash Mountain and left the old version behind in the late 1980s. New avenues of access and participatory culture opened up in the age of the Internet. Any notion that *Song of the South* has truly disappeared from public consciousness is problematized further by those who continue to vocalize their desire to see it officially reissued. The very act of advocacy gives *Song of the South* continued life and circulation. In 2006, a prominent Disney fan blogger, Jim Hill, started a rumor that *Song of the South* was being released on DVD in conjunction with its sixtieth anniversary. As this news spread, lively debates about the film developed across Internet forums and comment sections. In the process, many Disney fans put on their virtual Mickey ears and at times expressed the kind of heated rhetoric that seemed to validate the corporation's reluctance to rerelease the film in the first place.

So much of the contemporary criticism of *Song of the South* then stems from fans' continued insistence on its innocuousness. In an essay titled "Song of a Never-Was South," Hollis Henry wrote in response to the persistent, fan-generated rumors of the film's return. He effectively rearticulated what others have long said regarding its racist depiction of African Americans living an idyllic life of social inequality and servitude. Yet Henry was focused on a new trend in the history of the film's reception: "The question isn't whether the film should be banned. The important phenomenon is the legion of incensed and activist fans (white

and black) of the movie, fighting hard to have Disney release *Song of the South*. They argue it's only a children's movie. They say any offensive elements the film might have can be looked past. They say Walt Disney's intentions were good. And most importantly, they question whether the film is offensive at all."[6] It is worth noting that Henry still felt the need to explain after all these years why *Song of the South* is offensive. Henry was not arguing to continue censoring the film. Rather, he argued that its official absence only stoked reactionary fan anger over the perceived slight and facilitated conservative interpretations of the film, wherein offensive content was downplayed. While criticizing the film, Henry focused less on Disney and more on Internet fans who have repeatedly insisted on a distorted view of the film's politics.

The idea of Disney "fandom"—of a particular section of media audiences mobilized by an intensified level of devotion to the text—becomes especially relevant as we move into the modern era of digital convergence. As chapter 3 suggested, *Song of the South* fans have no doubt existed as long as the film itself, just as the long-running Disneyana Fan Club has existed in various guises since the 1960s. But the fans' role in relation to *Song of the South* becomes especially acute with the Internet, which allows greater forms of access and formal organization. Many scholars, such as Sara Gwenllian-Jones, have noted that "fandom itself has become a mainstream activity online."[7] In this case, fans of the old Uncle Remus film, and those of Disney in general, most clearly work to ensure its continued visibility long after the company has pulled it (perhaps) for good.

Disney fans can often problematize "critical utopian"[8] notions of online audience communities. Traditionally, Internet fandom is articulated as an untapped pool of democratic aspiration and collectively shared knowledge. Yet the Disney fan who rails against the "PC police," for instance, serves as an ironic deviation from the usually inclusive connotations associated with participatory culture. In his book *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins articulates a form of Internet fandom that "reject[s] the idea of a definitive version produced, authorized, and regulated by some media conglomerate [to instead] envision a world where *all of us* can participate in the creation and circulation of central cultural myths."[9] Looking at everyone from followers of the *Survivor* reality television show, *The Matrix* transmedia empire, and the *Harry Potter* books, Jenkins explores a wide range of case studies where fans work together. They build bases of knowledge that enhance their understanding of these respective franchises, to build a utopian world "where knowledge

is shared and where critical activity is ongoing and lifelong."[10] The fan is the hero of the *Convergence Culture* narrative, forcing media producers to maintain a more complicated attitude toward intellectual property consumption. To a point, this matches the *Song of the South* fans who reject Disney's official position on the film.

There is less clearly defined space for a notion of fan behavior predicated on willful ignorance or resistance. I do not refer here to Jonathan Gray's idea of "anti-fans," those who define themselves in relation to that which they hate.[11] Nor do I refer to "critics" of a text who take issue with its form or content. Rather, I mean those who are motivated first and foremost by a love of particular media texts. This is not to argue for a kind of "critical pessimism"[12] either. Instead, the Internet suggests the need for a continuing emphasis on a kind of audience ambivalence for which the case studies in *Convergence Culture* do not sufficiently account. For example, in the chapter on *Harry Potter*, Jenkins makes a problematic distinction between "traditional gatekeepers" who "seek to hold onto their control of cultural content"[13] (particularly the books' religious and generally conservative critics), and "fans"—those who wish to use the possibilities of participatory culture to challenge such entrenched biases. Implicitly, "fans" champion knowledge while "critics" restrict it. Many fans, such as those of Disney, work passionately to defend the conservative ideologies of media, though not necessarily those of the corporations or authors themselves.

The most utopian aspect of new media may ultimately be in its ability to reveal *dystopian* impulses—to allow us to see the *unsightly*. When looking at online racism in the "virtual [Old] South," Tara McPherson previously explored the many nostalgic websites that celebrate a conservative, often racist vision of Southern "heritage."[14] These sites challenge optimistic discourses that otherwise emphasize identity play in the age of new media. Far from a post-racial utopia, material on the Internet consistently reiterates the ways racism is alive and well, and much more rampant than many will admit. When thinking about how people discuss racism online, users do not just "pretend" to be someone else. Rather, the veil of anonymity creates possibilities for a "true" self to step forward. Fandom is no exception.

Many defenders of *Song of the South* shun and attack those who would suggest expanding the base of knowledge regarding the film's history. While they do not always support Disney the corporation, fans sometimes do support the idea of Walt himself. They often embrace a vision of the central (father) figure who produced a version of *Song of*

the South that is not racist, but simply "a product of its time." Or, as one writer posted on Topix.net in early 2007, "I am sick and tired of these liberal idiots who are [criticizing the film and] attempting to rewrite our history because of their own insecurities." Similarly, another added, "I'm so tired of the pc crowd and their single minded agenda foisted on all of us." These passages foreground active resistance to alternate ways of reading a conservative film such as *Song of the South*.

Instead of embracing collective information sharing, the mind-set of many Disney fans is more complicated. They may more closely align with the Judy Garland fans online who, according to Steve Cohan, "repudiat[e] the dominant reading of her gay associations kept in circulation by the media."[15] The Garland fans discussed in that essay are not as hostile as are *Song of the South* fans toward the "dominant reading," nor as verbally abusive toward people who disagree with them. Yet both groups share a common link in opposition to notions of inclusive, collaborative fandom. Put beside the results of Cohan's research, this trend among fans is more common than Jenkins's groundbreaking work adequately foregrounds. Any discussion of fandom is certainly complex, and we can explore further the Disney fan's negotiation with race in our current moment of convergence.

Disney fans, even defenders of *Song of the South*, are not *automatically* reactionary or in any way simplistically interchangeable. As Janet Wasko argues, "Responses to Disney are certainly not automatic and mechanical, or universal and ubiquitous, but complex, somewhat diverse, and often contradictory."[16] Instead, I seek to articulate a consistent pattern in the last ten years wherein many fans online often aggressively resist any political readings of the text and its complicated histories. Like many cult texts, the case of *Song of the South*'s Internet fandom mobilizes several interdependent, but still separate, issues: the right to access (obtaining copies of the film) and the accompanying question of legitimacy; the question of the film's racist textual representations; the larger resistance to "collective knowledge" in the digital era that such interpretative debates raise; and defending the legacy and moral character of the Disney company and Walt Disney himself. These are related issues, but they are not synonymous, and no one fan addresses or easily embodies all of them.

Even for a film as widely regarded as problematic as *Song of the South*, with a relatively small but passionate fan base, we cannot regard all fan behavior as monolithic. For example, some fans concede that the film may have offensive elements, but they still wish to see it released. At

the same time, we cannot presume that audiences are automatically defending Disney's canonical or corporate authority, regardless of how they personally interpret the representation of race. Studies on "slash" fiction, for instance, have suggested that fans who offer what may be viewed traditionally as "resistant" readings of a primary text (such as Kirk and Spock's hidden homosexual relationship) are not so much undermining the original creator's authority as they are offering what Gwenllian-Jones called the "actualization" of otherwise-implicit elements already concealed in the text.[17]

There is no simple binary between "Disney" as auteur and fans' rights, as differences remain between notions of corporate authority, authorship, and restrictive and expansive fandom. An audience member could embrace or reject charges of racism with equal contempt for the Disney company as it exists today. Fans can draw a wedge between what they see as Walt's original vision in the 1946 film, and the corporation's desire today to be "politically correct" by self-censoring that same authorial dream. Meanwhile, fans who attempt to control interpretation do not necessarily privilege the rights of corporate ownership. This contradiction is seen perhaps most explicitly in their willingness to circulate illegal versions of the movie.

Affect and nostalgia are also crucial components in understanding Disney fandom. The question of what gets defended by fans, and why, is problematized by powerful feelings of affection regarding culturally difficult texts. In the most theoretically informed discussion on the relation between affect and fan studies, Matt Hills noted, "Without the emotional attachments and passions of fans, fan cultures would not exist, but fans and academics often take these [affective] attachments for granted."[18] These attachments become especially crucial when dealing with politically charged texts. Such enthusiasm is undiminished by legitimate charges of racial and sexual insensitivity. It is too easy to argue that Disney fans are inherently conservative politically, or are merely duped by the narrative. Moreover, it would be dangerous to discount the powers of pleasure at work. Affective and cognitive approaches to Disney films are not easily reducible.

This chapter seeks to document the hows and the whys of *Song of the South*'s presence online today, with particular attention to fandom and nostalgia. A significant part of this requires being mindful of overtly conservative fandom within the contradictory workings of convergence culture. It also stresses the complex emotional reasons behind such defenses—remaining attentive to deep affective attachments that motivate

reactions to the political. While such devotion does not excuse a particular film, it does point toward great complexities involved when fans overtly attempt to negotiate a text's political ideology. There is room for a more nuanced position on what fans say online, and why, in relation to overt media representations of race. By looking more closely at Disney Internet fandom in the wake of *Song of the South*'s absence, we can begin to articulate an alternate space for how affect, nostalgia, and convergence intersect with the *political* in a way thus far underexplored by fan studies.

THE PERSISTENCE OF WHITENESS

The Reaganist "evasive whiteness" I articulated at length in the fourth chapter increasingly frames discussions of *Song of the South* today. A 2003 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, "Should 'Dated' Films See the Light of Today?," proved particularly illuminating. It framed the larger controversy around the film in such a way as to both highlight questions of race and evade the centrality of whiteness in the discussion. People interviewed in the article did not simply argue that *Song of the South*'s perceived entertainment value overrode issues of racism, as Leonard Maltin had in the 1970s and 1980s (although he was still doing that as well).[19] Instead, some were now taking the exact opposite approach—highlighting its perceived racial value, filtered through the specific language of tradition and heritage. Clarence Page, a writer for the *Chicago Tribune*, said that, "to quote Bill Cosby, so much black history has been lost, stolen or strayed. . . . There's a deep African American tradition in '*Song of the South*.' Brer Rabbit is an emblematic figure of African folklore, a direct descendent of the trickster who gets by on his wits."[20] Page's assessment of the film's origins was essentially accurate, but an important distinction was marginalized. Numerous scholars have already noted that much of the qualities Page describes are tied to Joel Chandler Harris's original literary work—as much *despite* the Disney version as because of it.

This *Los Angeles Times* article advocated for the rerelease of the film by refuting what few objections it notes, and quoting sympathetically the many people—old and young—who wished to see *Song of the South* again. The article relies on a considerable range of sources: Maltin, repeating much of his "color-blind" rhetoric left over from *The Disney Films*; Disney's daughter, Diane Miller; the *Song of the South* actress

Ruth Warrick; Christian Willis, a prominent *Song of the South* fan, who started the SongoftheSouth.net website and an online petition to have the film rereleased; and the University of Southern California film professor Todd Boyd. Willis's nostalgia is especially acute. He saw the film as a six-year old during the film's final theatrical rerelease in 1986, "and calls it a 'cherished childhood memory.'" Many fans of the film today recalled seeing it for the first time as children in the 1950s. Yet such nostalgia had already overtaken Willis and other members of this younger generation (such as James McKimson, founder of UncleRemusPages.com). The film's star, Warrick, was quoted as saying that "I think I could talk [Walt] into releasing it." Maltin says simply that "I hope [the film] has a chance to come out again and find a new audience. It would have to be done responsibly. I hope it comes to pass."[21]

More troubling in the article was its negotiations of the opinions of African Americans regarding *Song of the South*, in contrast to the many white people also quoted. With the exception of Boyd, all the other individuals interviewed passionately defended the film, advocating for its rerelease. As the lone dissenter on *Song of the South*, Boyd was quoted as saying, "It was a very racist film. . . . The character of Uncle Remus is a throwback. He affirms every negative and demeaning stereotype from slavery about Southern black men being happy-go-lucky, passive, carefree and non-threatening."[22] Boyd is explicitly framed as an academic—a move intended to marginalize his voice as much as lend credibility to it. His use of the past tense ("It *was* a very racist film") emphasizes how *Song of the South* was something from the past, something to *remain in* the past. But what is most interesting here is that the author explicitly mentions how Boyd and Page are both African American. Yet the article never once notes that everyone else quoted (Maltin, Willis, Warrick, and so forth) is white. The article assumes that Page and Boyd's racial background plays a role in their interpretation of *Song of the South*, though they have opposite opinions, but never considers that whiteness—the invisibility of whiteness—also plays a significant role in everyone else's reading of the film.

The article highlighted particularly well the importance of whiteness as the dominant discourse that frames discussions of *Song of the South* today. It rhetorically set Boyd and Page's respective views against each other, as though dividing imagined opposition to the film against itself. The implicit logic suggests that since not all blacks are opposed to the film, it is not really offensive to African Americans. This assumes that only black people's opinions on *Song of the South* were influenced by

their racial background. Yet Willis's status as a white person does not play any less of a role in his love of *Song of the South* than Boyd's blackness does in his great dislike. Willis's personal identification as a white child in the 1980s, when he first saw the film, would most naturally be with little white Johnny (thus making it difficult for him to see or appreciate Uncle Remus's demeaning social status). That these important distinctions are ignored testifies to the very same issues of institutional racism and white privilege that the film is accused of reactivating by its presence. As Richard Dyer has noted, "There is no greater power than to be 'just' human"[23]—that is, there is no greater power than to be a white fan of *Song of the South* who does not need to acknowledge the central role one's own race and cultural background may play in one's own warm reception of the film.

THE AFFECT OF PLEASURE

As tracking the elusiveness of whiteness shows, just listing off the reasons why *Song of the South* is a racist film doesn't move us closer to thinking about why fans defend the film so passionately. Susan Miller and Greg Rode have argued for an Althusserian understanding of such fan behavior. Disney was an outwardly neutral pedagogue, they write, who persuaded his audience to reproduce deeply rooted cultural prejudices of which they may or may not be conscious. Disney hails "us into subject positions from which we *freely* reproduce a certain sort of discriminatory culture."[24] Under this logic, for example, fans defend a film's racism because society and Disney have trained them to see the racial inequalities as the natural order of life. Indeed, one *Song of the South* defender on Topix.net summarizes his or her post simply with the statement "Life is what it is and was." Undoubtedly, there is a certain truth there about how some people (do not) see race in culturally or historically meaningful ways. As Richard Dyer in *Only Entertainment* has argued, "Class, race and sexual caste are denied validity as problems by the dominant (bourgeois, white, male) ideology of society. We should not expect show business to be markedly different."[25]

It is difficult to specify how ideological indoctrination works. The kind of framework proposed by Miller and Rode doesn't sufficiently take into account the role that other factors, such as pleasure, play in affecting fan reactions. "I didn't then nor do I now look at" *Song of the South*, writes a fan on Topix, "in any other way but for pure pleasure and

enjoyment." Such a response certainly doesn't protect the film as only "pure pleasure and enjoyment." Yet it does crucially point toward other influences and mechanisms in the maintenance of racist ideology. "As a relatively autonomous mode of cultural production," adds Dyer, show business "does not simply reproduce unproblematically patriarchal capitalist ideology."[26] For audiences in Dyer's formulation, and fans of *Song of the South*, such beliefs are embedded within, and in conflict with, the feelings of enjoyment the film also generates. Moreover, fans often privilege these feelings—and not politics—when conceptualizing their ideas about the film.

Thinking of Disney fandom in Althusserian terms is not so much inaccurate as indeterminate; it doesn't move us closer to understanding why fans think what they think. In some cases, fans aren't thinking, but instead are engaging on an affective level. As Hills notes, a fan's affective attachment to a particularly beloved text is the deepest part of the relationship between the two. Yet to approach this through interpellation is almost literally to speak a different language. Consider one telling comment on Topix from a fan in Palm Bay, Florida: "How in the world can you in anyway determine this film is derogatory?!?!?! And, PLEASE, tell me, how can you not love Zip A De Do Da, Zip A De Day, Wonderful Feeling, Wonderful Day! What's wrong with that? You guys are not making sense—what specifically is wrong with this movie?" [*sic*]. Failing to comprehend the debate at a cognitive level of politics, this particular fan seems *genuinely* confused in light of the film's positive emotions. Fans do not defend *Song of the South* because they think the film is not racist. Rather, they defend it because they love the film, because it reminds them of a "Wonderful Feeling, Wonderful Day." Remus, writes another fan at the Internet Movie Database, "possesses a praeternatural [*sic*] wisdom, sagacity, compassion and love. . . . Would that we could all open our hearts to learn from him." Many fans operate from a real position of pleasure—as in, *the feeling is real*. Only subsequent to that do they defend the politics.

If fans did not love the film already, they would not care either way what was said about it. This may seem obvious, but it's easily overlooked when focusing so closely on just the racial politics of a film such as *Song of the South*. My argument is that real positions of pleasure be more strongly considered for their own sake, *and* for how they affect reactions to, and reflections on, the political. Such tension echoes what Susan Willis has labeled previously "the problem with pleasure" when dealing with Disney.[27] How does one analyze it critically without ignoring that the

experiences are sometimes genuinely enjoyable? Some *Song of the South* fans, meanwhile, directly negotiate this permeable opposition between pleasure and politics. One poster writes at Topix, "Perhaps because I was a child, I failed to associate anything negative with it. I didn't stereotype anyone, I just loved the story for what it was, and that is magical entertainment in stellar Disney style." One cannot understand fans' cultural defenses without first understanding the affective power that otherwise complicates any notion of ideological complicity. Distinctions between affect and politics are crucial and should be carefully considered.

To a point, it's important to concede emotional attachment to racist texts as a primarily *affective* activity, rather than dismiss it as a kind of false consciousness that only serves the fan's implicit allegiance with its ideology. At best a kind of misguided musical utopia for many, *Song of the South* attempts to depict positive emotional bonds, especially between Remus and Johnny. Copresently, there is no doubt that *Song of the South* perpetuates stereotypes that strengthen culturally destructive notions of "institutional racism" and "white privilege." The film errs by presenting blacks with no identity outside white culture; by denying awareness of that life's hardships; and by offering white culture (whiteness itself) as the natural, unquestioned order of life. Although there certainly were white-run plantations historically, any depiction (such as *Song of the South*) that uncritically accepts and reinforces such relationships (as scholars such as James Snead[28] have noted) only perpetuates the problem. Dismissing the film's politics as "a product of its time" doesn't take into consideration what effect past "time" has today in reinforcing prejudices when the film is seen again. And one crucial component to convergence culture today is the lingering presence of older nostalgic texts such as *Song of the South*.

NEW MEDIA AND NOSTALGIA

Nostalgia is as important as pleasure in complicating fandom's relationship to problematic artifacts from Hollywood's past. When new media reproduces the past, it also generates contradictory affects, both of which interpret time in seemingly opposed ways—nostalgia and the *unsightly*. While nostalgia presumes a warm, childlike attachment to the past, the unsightly presents the aspect of the past that has been otherwise concealed. As I develop more in the conclusion, Bill Vaughn's

autobiographical essay revealed how the film was always coexistent with a more complicated relationship to his own past. While such connections are often nostalgic, they are not exclusively so. Or if they are, it suggests a more ambivalent understanding of the term. What is particularly intriguing about Vaughn's essay is how deeply *fearful* it is of the past, or of that past which the bootleg presence of *Song of the South* activates. Nostalgia is unquestionably a central factor in the appeal of the film, especially throughout the last forty years. But nostalgia is not simply a derogatory term for an unhealthy obsession with the past (although it can often be exactly that). The concept, in relation to the perceived newness of participatory culture, can be further problematized.

Nostalgia, according to Svetlana Boym, is "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed . . . a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy." Nostalgia is always an ironic by-product, an unintended consequence, of advances in technology (e.g., new media). In her study of twentieth-century modernity, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym argues that "nostalgia and progress are like Jekyll and Hyde: alter egos." Modernity produced nostalgia. As technological advances created future-oriented opportunities, people resisted with a heightened longing for what was left behind. The more "progress" pulls us toward the future, the stronger some react by trying to return to the past. Thus it shouldn't be a surprise that the Internet is as often a repository for reactive memories as it is a platform for utopian advances. Nostalgia "inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism," writes Boym, "in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals."[29] The instability of the Internet's technological possibilities always coexists with the reassurance of nostalgia.

Of course, lost pasts are crucial to the larger Disney brand of white, upper-middle-class utopia. In the specific case of *Song of the South*, there are at least two "lost" pasts operating—the historical pasts (not) represented in the film, and the personal pasts of fans remembering all or part of *Song of the South* as an experience from their childhoods. Matthew Bernstein previously noted the importance of nostalgia for post-Reconstruction that affected 1940s Southern audiences of the film.[30] But *Song of the South*'s nostalgia today has come to acquire an additional layer. The need for fans to see the film as an innocent product of its time (thus defending it against charges of racism) echoes the need to hold on to their own childhoods. The film's perceived racial utopia speaks to a larger ideal—the problematic but no less powerful belief that life was

easier, or simpler, as a child. Thus the film's possible availability also triggers a return to childhood. Or, as one fan writes on IMDb, trying to avoid the political debate, "I would just like to see it again."

On Internet forums, many focus on *Song of the South* because they themselves remember watching it as a kid. "I can't believe it's been so long," writes one at SliceofSciFi.com, "that people still remember 'Zippidy-doo-dah' [*sic*] but DON'T remember the film it came from." Several begin with direct references to their own youth. "As a child I loved *Song of the South*," writes one at Topix, while another adds that the film "was a part of my childhood and brings back fond memories." Over at IMDb, meanwhile, several fans write from the same shared background: "I haven't seen the film since I was very young"; "I remember seeing this movie when I was six years old"; "I have just seen *Song of the South* for the first time in 35 years"; "I saw *Song of the South* as a small child." Several mention the exact time frame, further heightening an awareness of time's passing. Even Miller and Rode start their essay from the premise that they themselves are mindful of how Disney films affected them as children. Moreover, they acknowledge the continued presence of this "kid in me," a concept through which people of all ages constitute a sense of self.[31] For Miller and Rode, studying kid-oriented Disney films is important because such memories remain with the adult, affecting their behavior and ideological dispositions. Of course, fans also discuss *Song of the South* in relation to kids as a defense based on its intended innocence. This evokes Nicholas Sammond's discussion of Disney and the "American child" as a social construction. Adults claim to protect the "child" from media's effects more to regulate cultural norms than to shield children.[32] Responses to *Song of the South* make that explicit when they note having seen it as a child, or wishing to show it to their children or grandchildren, as a defense against charges of racism.

The affect of nostalgia generates defenses just as passionately as do the feelings of joy and pleasure. Fans try to protect not only Disney, but their own memories of the past as well. *Song of the South* is itself a nostalgic view of the American South, generating *that* nostalgia for audiences past and present, alongside a different nostalgia for fans today trying to relive their own childhood. Indeed, a desire to return to childhood may be what provokes the most satisfaction for fans. For them, *Song of the South* improves over time by intensifying childhood memories, along with its musical and emotional powers. Moreover, its official absence plays to the heightened sense of loss necessary for nostalgia.

But fans are also using nostalgia to protect their own understanding

of history. "No amount of political correctness is going to change the past . . . ," writes one at Topix. "Films like [*Song of the South*] show how the world was, *or how it was perceived*" (emphasis mine). The need to distinguish between perception and reality here is telling. This fan implies that there ultimately was no distinction between *Song of the South*'s depiction of the past and (white) perceptions of that past. More to the point, any differences do not concern them. Instead, how some fans *want* to perceive these worlds (adolescent, Southern, idyllic) is all that matters. "One is nostalgic not for the past the way it was," writes Boym, "but for the past the way it could have been." [33] *Song of the South* may generate a feeling of nostalgia because fans knowingly hold on to an idealized past. It may also be because some fans sense that such an affectively evoked, idealized childhood was quite possibly not all that "perfect" to begin with.

THE UNSIGHTLY INSIDE THE VAULT

The lure of nostalgia always carries the danger of moving too close to the past. Instead of confronting that which is reassuring, something troubling is unlocked. I would suggest, however, that such ugliness is itself potentially liberatory. There is much of value to be gleaned from *Song of the South*'s most offensive defenses. Convergence can be reassuringly nostalgic—revisiting recycled childhood texts that have suddenly reappeared. It can also reveal the ugliness of suppressed images that are deeply troubling to one group or many. Users can see that which they lacked easy access to previously. Importantly, others can then highlight and contest those offensive ideologies. This struggle symbolically plays out in the *Saturday Night Live* skit "Journey to the Disney Vault." Like many moments from film and television, this skit found a second life on the Internet. Between periodic appearances on such websites as YouTube, AOL Video, MySpace TV, and Hulu, "Journey to the Disney Vault" has probably been viewed by as many people online as by those who watched the initial NBC broadcast late one Saturday night in April 2006. The skit begins looking and sounding just like a typical Disney video advertisement. We see a perfectly reproduced "Disney Home Video Entertainment" logo, followed by an urgent advertisement. "This month," says the narrator, "*Bambi II* is going into the Disney vault. . . . After just seventy days on sale, the glorious *Bambi II* DVD goes into the Disney vault for ten years." "You better hurry," says one of the *Bambi*

characters, "Flower," urging consumers not to wait. Up to this point, the clip is a dead ringer for a real *Bambi II* advertisement, until the narrator starts listing off other, increasingly absurd titles (complete with images), that will be following the film into the Disney vault: *Cinderella II, Bambi 2002, Sleeping Beauty III: Lil Sleepy Meets Aladdin, Hunchback 6: Air Dog Quasi, Mulan 8: The Prozoids Fight Back, The Jungle Book 3.0: Jungle Blog,* and the pornographic *101 Fellations.* Each fake title (with the exception of the first one) highlights Disney's obsession with exploiting every potential theatrical franchise through the ubiquity of direct-to-video merchandising. It also reinforces Disney's strategy to rein in and mystify that exploitation further through the artificial scarcity of the Disney vault.

But "Journey to the Disney Vault" also explores issues of the unsightly. What unintended side effects does the desire for *access* bring? The skit cuts to two animated children, sitting in their living room, complaining about how "all my favorite movies are in the Disney vault." The one girl says, "I wish we could live in the Disney vault." This prompts the magical appearance of Mickey Mouse, who promises to take them inside the Disney vault—"The ultimate child's dream come true." Hence the skit becomes another advertisement for a new fictional Disney film, *Journey into the Disney Vault* ("available on DVD only"). Once inside, the children rediscover the titles they've missed, such as *Beauty and the Beast: Hawaiian Adventure* and *Lion King 5 2/3: Simba Sits in for Meredith* (a reference to the Disney-owned ABC's daytime hit *The View,* and a subtle nod to the extent of Disney's diversification strategies).

The girl's desire to live inside the vault becomes an eerie, unsightly reminder of most children's deep ignorance regarding Disney's actual history. To her, Disney is nothing but Mickey and princesses. Inside, the kids find other, increasingly disturbing items as well. One is Walt's own frozen head, which plays on the inaccurate urban legend that Disney had himself frozen so that he could eventually come back when science was able to do such things. We also see Vivien Leigh's frozen head as well, so Walt could marry her after he was thawed. Other items, though, cut closer to historical accuracy: the HUAC files, regarding Walt's notorious cooperation with blacklisting and his participation in other anti-labor activities; references to Disney's rumored anti-Semitism; references to controversial images in past films, such as *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) and *Fantasia* (1940); and Jim Henson himself, who has been kidnapped and imprisoned here because he refused to sell Disney the rights to the Muppets. More subversively, they find blueprints for a

Civil War–themed amusement park, complete with attractions such as "Uncle Mickey's Cabin" and "Donald [Duck]'s Slave Auction." This is based only loosely on actual 1990s plans for a "Disney's America" theme park in Virginia. The unbuilt Civil War theme park points cleverly to the company's willingness to both distort and commodify American history. It also forcefully invokes issues of racial ignorance of which Disney has been often accused.

"Journey to the Disney Vault" and the wide variety of opinion expressed on the Internet remind us that racist discourse has not gone anywhere. Copresently, our awareness of it is not necessarily bad. Its potential prevents particular aspects of American media culture from sliding back into a Reaganist mind-set that claims not to see race. This is highlighted in particular when the kids find a VHS copy of *Song of the South.* "I've never heard of this one," says the boy. A horrified Mickey tries to grab the tape: "Oh, nobody wants to see that one anymore." "How bad could it be?," asks the girl. "It's the very original version," Mickey says, "that [Disney] only played at parties." The boy pops the tape in, and we hear the film's well-known "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," featuring Baskett as "Uncle Remus." While still sounding uncannily like Baskett's voice, the skit changes the lyrics from "My, oh, my, what a wonderful day, plenty of sunshine headin' my way," to "Negros are inferior in every way, whites are much cleaner, that's what I say." The point of the *SNL* parody is not to perpetuate these supremacist attitudes, but rather to make explicit how the film itself reaffirms such stereotypes. As its creator, Robert Smigel, notes, "Obviously, that's not a real clip. . . . They have kept *Song of the South* in a vault within a vault. I think there are three locks on it."[34] Suppressing the film in "Journey to the Disney Vault" represents Disney's struggle to protect its own family-friendly brand from being tarnished, and its unsightly history from being exposed. As a text now circulating online, the "Journey to the Disney Vault" also serves as a metaphor for the cultural and affective lives of old texts—how the Internet potentially reexposes controversies once concealed. Here, the "vault" mutates from an "official" advertising metaphor, shrewdly sustaining product demand, to a more critical one representing Disney's constant attempts to conceal that which otherwise threatens its carefully crafted public image.

"Journey to the Disney Vault" was not the only recent appropriation and criticism of *Song of the South* on *Saturday Night Live.* A few years earlier, the show did another spoof of the film with the mock testimonial commercial "Uncle Jemima's Pure Mash Liquor." In this skit, Tracy Morgan played "Uncle Jemima," the husband of Aunt Jemima, who is trying

to sell his own brand of moonshine. Although the Disney film is never directly referenced, Uncle Jemima is clearly based on Uncle Remus, down to the same bald head with sides of gray hair. Moreover, an unseen chorus sings a generic version of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" with lyrics that reference a "wonderful day." The skit is filled with animated bluebirds flying around the colorful mise-en-scène. The creatures, meanwhile, are eventually implied to be not the product of a fun, fanciful world, but rather Jemima's drunken hallucinations. One of the implicit critiques of *Song of the South* here is that Uncle Remus—always happy, always hiding in his cabin behind the mansion—is close to the old racist stereotype of the "coon," which articulates a white perception of blacks as lazy drunks.

New media can and does allow for the reinforcement of nostalgia, but on the complex and contradictory vastness of the Internet, nostalgia is unevenly copresent with what nostalgia tries to conceal, the unsightly. The Internet isn't more "democratic"—but it does allow room for alternate content, good and bad, which networks, advertisers, and conservative advocacy groups were quick to censor at the advent of television. While major global corporations can and still do control much of the material online, they are often indifferent to the content *as long as they control potential revenue generated by it*. A side effect is that people have the ability to share material that corporations wouldn't necessarily endorse. Certainly, Disney has taken online copyright infringement seriously, yet due to the Digital Millennium Copyright Act—which protects websites from lawsuits provided they pull content when notified[35]—illegal material can appear online for considerable, if ephemeral, amounts of time.

Disney appears limited in its attempts to suppress the awareness of its most controversial object, *Song of the South*. For example, fan websites (such as Christian Willis's) have not been shut down for copyright infringement. Vendors openly sell copies online, including on eBay. Disney does not wish to rerelease *Song of the South* at present, but there doesn't appear to be much evidence that it's seeking to stamp out all traces of it either. As in the early 1970s, Disney seems content with the possibility that the controversy (and now the aggressive forms of online fan activity) keeps *Song of the South* present and still potentially lucrative, without the company having to appear as though it is actively working to condone the film. While "Journey to the Disney Vault" captures the unsightly aspect of the company's past and its relationship to *Song of*

the South, in another sense it misses Disney's careful economic ambivalence toward the film.

While SNL's "Journey to the Disney Vault" and "Uncle Jemima" circulate on the Internet as explicit and implicit critiques of the Disney style, *Song of the South*, and the racist assumptions that come with it,[36] private individuals have also posted critiques of the film and of Disney's long tradition of racism as well. Most of the work is by fans who post videos that resist the film's racist connotations. But YouTube has yet to feel the brunt of Disney's copyright protection regarding *Song of the South*. In addition to several presumably illegal postings of the film's animated sequences, one particular user in June 2008 posted the entire film in ten separate segments, fragments that had still not been pulled off the site more than three years later.[37] The user described the clips only as a "study of pre–Civil War South good race relations" [*sic*]. The description reinforces the perception that the film promotes positive race relations in some people's minds, and that some still view it as a *pre*–Civil War film. Another fan posted a particularly emotional excerpt with Johnny and Remus discussing a dog, their friendship, and the stories they share;[38] one posted the "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" sequence (lifted from the VHS sing-along version);[39] and an older white man posted a video of himself reading the "Wonderful Tar Baby Story," complete with his own Remus accent.[40] This last user also promoted the importance of "books" in the new media age, believing that various versions of the story have been distorted through years of remediation. Many of these clips isolate *Song of the South*'s most powerfully affective fragments, reiterating the moments that struck these fans the most when they first saw it, and also positing the film's emotional appeal as overriding any criticism of racism. These clips clearly violate Disney's copyright—not to mention re-foregrounding its most notorious eyesore on a popular public forum. But the company was slow to make YouTube pull them down, if ever. Moreover, these clips only scratch the surface of fan activity online in defense of *Song of the South*.

THE CASE OF ROGER EBERT AND FAN RESPONSES ONLINE

One criticism of *Song of the South* in particular became a rallying point for fans. The *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Roger Ebert's 2000

critique of the old Disney film produced heated reaction from fans who found his take condescending and even racist. The responses are motivated in part by Ebert's own ethnicity. Fans in the last ten years have shown reluctance to criticize (or even address) African Americans directly. Instead, they focus on "white liberal guys,"[41] as the online Disney enthusiast Jim Hill put it. Despite all the critics who have condemned *Song of the South*, many of them African American (such as Henry), Ebert is the one often used by fans as a rhetorical punching bag. Of course, Ebert's stature gives his criticism more weight as well. The incident in question came in a section of his website called "Movie Answer Man." Ebert received a passionate letter from a self-described black father who was frustrated that Ebert's colleague (presumably his former television cohost Richard Roeper) had advocated rereleasing *Song of the South* because of its aesthetic value. Ebert's short response noted that "I am against censorship and believe that no films or books should be burned or banned, but film school study is one thing and a general release is another. Any new Disney film immediately becomes part of the consciousness of almost every child in America, and I would not want to be a black child going to school in the weeks after [*Song of the South*] was first seen by my classmates. Peter Schneider, chairman of the Disney Studios, tells me that the studio has decided to continue to hold the film out of release."[42] Ebert's argument that the film should be available for critical study (as opposed to being banned) was particularly irritating to fans. They adamantly argue that *Song of the South* is for kids (or for adults attempting to hold on to their childhood) to shut off possible discussions of racism. Criticism of Ebert across the Internet is well represented by a response from "Merlin Jones" in 2005, originally posted on SaveDisney.com (started as part of Roy E. Disney's attempt to wrest control of the company from Michael Eisner) and later reposted on Christian Willis's fan website SongoftheSouth.net. The post was likely anonymous, as "Merlin Jones" is certainly a reference to the live action Disney film *The Misadventures of Merlin Jones* (1964). In it, Jones wrote:

> Film critic Roger Ebert seems to envision a future comprised of privileged elites who have special access to controversial films. . . . A slippery slope, Roger. And who makes that decision for everyone, your thumb? Should we keep children from knowing their own cultural history, their own chance to learn—to remember—to track society's progress or mistakes—to keep injustice from happening again? As a

society, we can't progress honestly if we hide or forget or re-imagine our collective past to make it more easily digestible (ironically, one of the accusations made against the film). And who is to ultimately decide what the "common man" can or cannot see? Forced utopianism through suppression of intellectual works is potentially far more destructive—and dangerous—than open and constructive conversation. Keeping this film locked in a vault only suppresses potent fodder for debate—a positive early learning tool for cross-cultural understanding.[43]

Without considering the questionable assessment of *Song of the South* as an "intellectual work," Jones's own implicit call for a form of "collective intelligence" is hypocritical. A space for "open and constructive conversation" is exactly what Ebert and other critics were advocating in response to repeated calls that the film be rereleased. Meanwhile, fans such as Jones are the ones intent on keeping "children from knowing their own cultural history" by rejecting, sometimes harshly, legitimate criticisms of the film.

Moreover, no *Song of the South* fan has ever advocated rereleasing the film for its potential to enlighten children on social inequalities and offensive media representations. To do so would contradict their core belief—that the film is *not racist* to begin with. Such contradictions run throughout these defenses: *Song of the South* is a product of its time, "dated," but also not offensive; the film shows how far society has evolved in race relations, yet somehow is not a negative portrayal of African Americans to begin with; the film creates constructive conversation about race and society, as long as no one criticizes it and just enjoys its entertainment value; and, finally, we can talk about representations of race in *Song of the South*, as long as—paradoxically—we all agree that race doesn't really matter.

Not surprisingly then, Jones insists that *Song of the South* isn't racist at all. Reiterating a common fan position, it is instead "a reaffirming story of the bond between two friends that refuse to be separated by race, class, age—a friendship that is forged and held against all odds." Finally, Jones thus argued that fans of the film should have exclusive rights to *Song of the South*, since Disney has no intention of rereleasing it: "US copyright laws exist only to protect those commercial rights—if the copyright holder has truly abandoned the intent to exploit the property, rights should fall back into the public domain where we can all share the mate-

rial freely. 'Use it or lose it' should become our new copyright mantra."
Ironically, between bootlegs, file sharing, and YouTube, fans have essen-
tially taken over the film's copyright anyway. "Like it or not, for good or
ill, *Song of the South* is art," Jones wrote. "And art needs to be accessible
to the people, no matter its rough (or well-polished) edges. . . . So we
can talk it out together—not hide it. Otherwise our civil liberties—our
collective freedoms of expression—are seriously threatened." Such pas-
sages highlight how Jones's argument is patently hypocritical and self-
righteously over the top. Had many other *Song of the South* fans not
reiterated it subsequently, it could just as easily pass for parody. Here,
participatory appeals to dialogue online—"our collective freedoms of
expression"—become reappropriated and mobilized to *silence dissent*,
rather than to expand a communal base of knowledge.

AFFECT AND NOSTALGIA
IN THE POLITICS OF
ONLINE DISNEY FANDOM

Besides Jones, there is ample evidence of supporters gravi-
tating increasingly to online forums to voice frustration. The IMDb dis-
cussion board for *Song of the South* contains several hundred comments,
while another forum page on *DVD Talk Forum*, "*Song of the South* Any-
time Ever?," had nearly three hundred comments dating back to the fall
of 2003.[44] Almost all these comments in some way address its controver-
sial status, or insist that Disney release the film on DVD. On Topix in
March 2007, more than 170 comments were posted in just four days (not
counting ones removed from the site for offensive content), following the
rumor of the film's DVD release. While some criticized the movie, most
defended *Song of the South* and attacked those who criticized either the
film's message or the prospect of its rerelease.

This is where affect reemerges. When fans defend the film today,
some on Topix consider it a "harmless entertaining" children's film
whose politics "means nothing to little kids." This, too, is problematic,
but it emphasizes how fans sidestep the politics by instead referencing
the feelings that *Song of the South* evokes. "I just had the pleasure of
watching this film," posts one commentator at IMDb. "Remus is a natu-
ral, lovable black man," writes another, "who cares about people and tells
the Brer Rabbit stories with such warmth and joy. . . . Hattie McDan-
iel portrays a warm wonderful character." Such sentiments embody the

present reality of *Song of the South* for fans—not the political (or intellectual) discourses revealed by the film's representation of the American South, or its championing of whiteness. "I still sing the song about Mr. Blue Bird on my shoulder to this day," remarks one fan at Topix. "It is one of the happiest moments of my childhood." Remus, writes another, "project[s] a positive, good harted [*sic*] attitude to the world." *Song of the South* offers fans a vision of racial utopia where whites and blacks coexist peacefully—an *affective* utopia. "Utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies," Dyer writes. "It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized."[45] In his discussion of the nonrepresentational, emotional power of musicals, Dyer argues they work "at the level of sensibility, by which I mean an affective code that is characteristic of, and largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production."[46] While *Song of the South* doesn't offer a convincing representation of harmonic racial relations, there is the affective *sense* of such a utopia generated for fans.

Rather than consider Disney fans as actively or passively promoting the racism of the film, we can see that it provokes a utopian feeling that for them transcends such issues. "Its [*sic*] very hard to see the image of a little white hand in that of an elderly black man," writes one fan at *DVD Talk Forum* regarding the film's climatic deathbed scene, "and view it as racist." Because they enjoy the film, because *Song of the South* fills them with pleasure and even feelings of love, nasty political implications aren't just overlooked. In fact, their very existence becomes impossible to comprehend when the movie itself is so unambiguously positive in its emotions. In other words, because the film doesn't take a critical view toward former slaves ("All African Americans depicted are sympathetic characters," notes a fan at IMDb), because it presents Remus as a positive figure for white children, *Song of the South* cannot be racist, they reason. Yet this sort of affection is how classic Hollywood often negotiated controversies not easily resolved. If *Song of the South* presents a view of racial tensions in the South, according to fans, it does so only to alleviate those tensions. In the conclusion of the film, blacks and whites are happy together; that nostalgic view of the past licenses a utopian view of the future. The film's children, notes one fan on Topix, "could care less about race and actually are embracing diversity." On IMDb, one poster argues that *Song of the South* is "a well-intentioned effort at promoting positive race relations." The film's concluding multicultural image of blacks and whites hand in hand, argues Douglas Brode, presents a vision where "total integration is achieved," and "ought to be acknowledged as

The utopian shot, late in Song of the South, *of Uncle Remus and Johnny holding hands. Fans of the film often cite this warmly affective image as proof that the movie is not racist. This is in keeping with a larger trend in the last thirty years to substitute personal memories of* Song of the South *for a collective understanding of the past—both the plantation history misrepresented in the film, and the reception history of the film's controversies.*

idealism of a liberal bent, highly progressive in its attitude for its time."[47] According to such logic, children and adults—black and white—singing "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," reassures the audience that racial tensions have been overcome in the film's utopia.

Hence, as these statements imply, some not only reject the racism but go so far as to suggest that the film is liberal-minded—something unthinkable sixty years ago. Brode posits in two recent books that Disney films were highly progressive for their time, and even helped inspire subsequent movements such as multiculturalism and the 1960s counter-culture. Brode is first and foremost a self-described *fan* of Disney. For him, these films tap into visions of a color-blind society. The same image of Remus's hand holding that of Johnny's, which one fan above cited in particular as a rebuttal to accusations of *Song of the South*'s racism, serves as a perfect example of Brode's reading: "In close-up, Johnny reaches out and takes Remus's hand, black and white lovingly united. When twelve years later, such a scene concluded Stanley Kramer's adult

drama *The Defiant Ones*, the image was hailed as a major breakthrough in socially conscious drama. Disney, as always, dared to go there first, if without proper recognition."[48]

In addition to distorting Hollywood's larger history of representing race, this reading of such moments is selective. While the image he mentions is potentially powerful (and should be acknowledged for its affective *possibility*), to examine it alone is to remove that moment, like the YouTube clips, from a larger narrative context of racial and historical deception. As with Kramer's film, the image is potentially progressive insofar as black *merges* with, and thus reaffirms, white. Brode's work presents itself as a corrective to what he sees as the usually cynical approaches to Disney. In particular, he twice cites as representative Henry Giroux's focus on degenerative nostalgia and white culture.

But this unabashedly positive take often ends up as simplified as the work it seeks to critique. For example, the utopic ideal of community, he writes, "sustained us during the troubled postwar period when Americans were victims of anomie, each a fragment of the lonely crowd."[49] Brode argues that *Song of the South*'s vision of racial integration served as a model for uniting Americans in a postwar period often noted for its modernist and noirish emphasis on individual isolation. Yet this overlooks how politically regressive the film was in the wake of activism during World War II to end African American stereotypes in Hollywood. Moreover, his critique neglects to take into account how the film was criticized for its "Uncle Tom" representations as harshly during the 1940s as during any other period in the twentieth century. The film didn't actually "unite" anyone upon its initial postwar release. This reading is, at best, rooted in fond and highly selective memories of *Song of the South*.

As Victor Burgin notes in *The Remembered Film*, recollection is fundamentally centered not on wholes, but on fragments.[50] What results in memory are merely these particular excerpts—isolated sounds (such as the songs), images (the hands), and feelings—of what the film was. These fragments, moreover, come to stand for something other than its original narrative context. For Brode, the decontextualized emphasis on *Song of the South*'s powerfully affective black and white hands, "lovingly united," comes to stand in as an early statement of multiculturalism, despite the fact that the image also depicts a former slave serving the (emotional) needs of a white child. Such a discussion appears dependent on foregrounding (and thus isolating) its most powerful utopian elements in excess of the narrative itself. As Burgin suggests, the passage of time in particular helps isolate such images as they take on a life of their own.

Song of the South's notorious status—as a resilient film now nearly seventy years old, and as a text generally concealed from easy public viewing—has intensified the accumulation of such utopian fragments.

CONVERGENCE AND AMBIVALENT NOSTALGIA

Convergence culture presents a wealth of possible contradictory responses to the lingering presence of past media. Across the online fan responses examined, there is often resistance to questions of racism that participatory culture can ask; yet there is also occasionally an awareness that perceptions of the past may differ from what it really was. Moreover, in this rupture rests opportunities for new knowledge—enlightened relationships with the past. Reassurance is not as simple for the fan as ignoring social problems that remain in Disney texts, even if fans sometimes rationalize the film's racist ideology in excess of its own narrative support. Seeing how these fans themselves respond requires first recognizing them as genuinely moved and mobilized by the emotions they experience, while also respecting that they are not ignorant masses oblivious to the ideological work these texts perform. And even issues of race in *Song of the South* are always complicated by other factors that fans or audiences may bring to the film. For Brode, Disney presents a particularly idyllic presentation of nostalgia, suggesting that it allows fans to "get back in touch with, if not a past reality, then some idea of who we once were—members of a generous, easygoing, positive community."[51] This inadvertently affirms Boym's claim that one is nostalgic more for what the past *could* have been. Such loss can set into motion the need to create a better present to come, whereby the opportunities lost in the past set goals to be realized in the future. This explains in part Boym's distinction between "restorative" and "reflective" forms of nostalgia. The former attempts to preserve an idealized past, while the latter suggests learning from memories in the hopes of a better future. Bernstein argues that black Atlanta newspapers in the 1940s had hoped that "nostalgia could be an effective tool for raising white consciousness" among audiences at the time of the film's debut.[52] *Song of the South*'s potential utopia suggests how the future could still be, as the *Atlanta Daily World* once hoped.

The irreducibility of these issues leaves one balancing the ambivalence of nostalgia, race, and Disney fandom in the modern age of convergence.

Today, *Song of the South* serves as a utopian narrative of reassurance for fans. Yet the ambivalence of convergence also *affects* reassurance, generating but also problematizing it. While affectively charged texts such as *Song of the South* make racial, class, and gender tensions *seem* to evaporate, much also can be changed by the temporal tensions that remain. Fans may rethink assumptions underlining those same otherwise unquestioned feelings. Such reassurance—along with the loss of ruptured childhoods—can point toward future possibilities. What might happen today if more open-minded fans of *Song of the South*—who hadn't seen the film in thirty, forty, even fifty years—were to watch it again, with more critical eyes? Would all of them be so quick to dismiss the criticisms? (This is one key reason to advocate for the film's release.)

There may be no better example of this today than Bill Vaughn's online piece regarding his experiences with the film both as a child in 1956 and an adult in 2006.[53] His article points to the ways in which a fan's affective relationship to the past, even when negotiating representations of race, is never as simple as warm feelings of nostalgia. The sometimes-unsightly past can complicate the present as easily as it simplifies it. In some respects, Vaughn's article is typical of contemporary fan reactions. Containing some historical inaccuracies, it recalls not so much the film itself but rather memories of seeing it long ago. Yet particularly fascinating is that his piece ultimately resists nostalgia—new technologies allow him to see the unsightly. In obtaining *Song of the South*, in returning to his childhood, he reveals a deep *fear* of the past.

One day, Vaughn decided that he finally wished to see the film again, a movie he watched four times in 1956. As usual, he opted to purchase an illegal bootleg through the Internet. Vaughn fought the desire to watch *Song of the South* again for so long because of a troubling moment it spoke to from childhood—his mother's suicide. This is another way his article is distinctive from others online—it is about neither the warmth of nostalgia, nor *Song of the South*'s racism. Vaughn acknowledges the racial controversy thoughtfully, but his concern is not with Uncle Remus—rather, "Johnny's story was everything." Vaughn's father cheated on his mother, which led to parental separation (a key narrative development in the film), and then to her suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in the garage. But in *Song of the South*, Johnny's parents reconcile and everybody lives happily ever after. He developed a deep affective attachment to the film because it helped him escape the pain of his own life. No doubt he was hardly alone among the countless children of broken homes in developing such feelings during the film's respective theatri-

cal appearances over forty years.[54] By 2006, *Song of the South* activated memories for Vaughn as troubling as they were reassuring. And when he ends the story without a "dry eye in the house,"[55] it's difficult to pinpoint that for which he weeps.

There is certainly something utopian, but not ignorant, in Vaughn's moving remembrance. A danger, of course, exists here in reiterating affective and personal histories (thus marginalizing cultural politics) within such ideologically charged discourse. *Convergence Culture* supports approaching fandom with a sense of "critical utopianism"—embracing the potential of fandom, particularly online.[56] There also remains a heightened, yet uncynical, awareness of how issues such as institutional power, corporate diversification, and conservative fandom might influence an otherwise-utopian conception of fan behavior. Anecdotes such as Vaughn's accentuate the occasional presence of fandom's *own* (self-) critical utopianism. His remembrance offers a momentary, nostalgic impulse to return affectively to a not-so-innocent time, copresent with an awareness of the various histories (racial, national, personal) that haunt that impulse. Likewise, we may follow his ambivalent lead and find critical approaches to digital participatory culture strongest when the criticism is applied equally to the sometimes hostile and often ambivalent fans, such as those of Disney and *Song of the South*. Only then would a utopian conception of fandom find its richest possibilities.

CONCLUSION

On Rereleasing Song of the South

*Prints are unavailable and a childhood memory is notori-
ously unreliable.*
RICHARD SCHICKEL, *THE DISNEY VERSION*

At various conferences in the last six or seven years, I have
given presentations that touched on different aspects of my research into
the histories of Disney's most notorious film. In each case, I was greeted
with the same dawning awareness of *Song of the South* I mentioned in
the introduction. Many people had forgotten that they remembered the
film, or at least the Brer Rabbit books. But I was also always asked the
same question, which I had studiously avoided addressing in my talks:
What did *I* think about *Song of the South*? Specifically, did I personally
feel the film should be rereleased officially? While my project here has
been to document historically what *others* did with *Song of the South*
(both Disney and the film's various audiences), I have never claimed to
be impartial. It should be clear throughout what I personally think of
Song of the South. I have not tried to sugarcoat its racist connotations,
nor have I defended the film or its supporters.

Since I will again be asked, I wish to end by stating clearly that I do
not believe the film should be kept out of circulation either. While I am
not sympathetic to its supporters, or to Disney's bottom line, I do think
Song of the South should be rereleased. This comes with at least two
important qualifications. For one, audiences today need to understand
how the film was not inoffensive even in 1946, or at any other point in
time. Of all the myths surrounding it today, I am most troubled by the
persistent claim that *Song of the South* is merely a "product of its time,"
an assumption that is racially ignorant, culturally destructive, and just
plain historically inaccurate. Second, detractors should be allowed equal
space to criticize the film by calling attention to the various historical

and cultural reasons why it was, and remains, so offensive. In many ways, these two ideas are what I have worked so aggressively to reinforce throughout this book. It is important to bring the film and its racial stereotypes out of the briar patch and back into the open. Once there, we can again make visible the series of larger cultural debates that *Song of the South* activates, instead of conceding them to a vocal minority that is empowered by critical (and corporate) silence.

DISNEY'S MOST NOTORIOUS FILM

Song of the South has always coexisted with questions of its accessibility and discussions about its controversy. Within that dynamic is a particular history of race, media audiences, and technologies in the twentieth-century United States. This project was less about *Song of the South* and more about the issues it raises in circulation through repetition and difference. The coexistence of its presence and absence over nearly seventy years offers a uniquely illuminating history of affect, nostalgia, technology, and critical race theory. My book explored three interrelated issues: how questions of race have been negotiated through the media, how Disney emerged as the dominant media giant it is, and how changes in media technologies are inseparable from the cultural, political, and historical issues with which they intersect. The film's first appearance in 1946 was met with criticism from both white and black audiences, and therefore Disney kept the work out of circulation for another ten years, and then another sixteen. In a way, limited access to the film today is nothing new. During many of those years, as with today, the film was less widely available in its full-length theatrical whole than it was in transmediated fragments (books, records, clips, etc.).

When *Song of the South* finally succeeded at the U.S. box office in the 1970s, it coexisted with the legacy of the film's controversy—which, along with other factors, played a role in *Song of the South*'s success. That controversy most explicitly manifested itself in Ralph Bakshi's *Coonskin* (1974), a blaxploitation satire based on the Disney film. When the film was released again in 1980 and 1986, it was met with criticism that was more direct. This was tied in no small part to *Song of the South*'s perceived affinity with the political ascendency of Ronald Reagan. Because of that enduring criticism, Disney began in the late 1980s and 1990s to rewrite and dissipate *Song of the South* across its transmedia universe. This strategy was most prominently featured in the Disney theme park

attraction Splash Mountain. The film has now been in the vault for nearly thirty years. But fan advocacy, bootleg distribution, and other forms of Internet activity have kept the film as accessible in our current age of digital culture as it has ever been. Throughout all the decades and historical contexts, texts and paratexts, appearances and disappearances, the hidden histories of *Song of the South* offer a unique and telling glimpse into how nostalgia, whiteness, affect, and convergence affect the reception and ideologies of twentieth-century American media.

WHATEVER HAPPENED (HAPPENS) TO THAT FILM . . .

Where is *Song of the South* today? In 2007 Jaime Weinman wrote in *Maclean's* that the film was "one of the titles that fans most request from the fabled Disney Vault."[1] This eerily echoes rhetoric around the film from the 1970s. As recently as 2008, the *USA Today* film critic Mike Clark casually mentioned in an otherwise-unrelated article that *Song of the South* ranked alongside John Huston's *African Queen* (1951) as the two films highest on "consumers' DVD wish lists."[2] Is it a sign of things to come that Huston's safari masterpiece has since been released onto both DVD and Blu-ray Disc? The emergent sense with Disney is that eventually the film will be distributed on various home video formats for the primary reason that too much money stands to be made, even more so with the controversy surrounding it. Disney "has to look for potential bestsellers that aren't on DVD yet," writes Weinman. "And because scarcity increases value, no film has more potential value than *Song of the South*."[3] Back in March 2007, Disney President Bob Iger (who took over after Michael Eisner stepped down) hinted at a shareholders' meeting that the film might receive distribution. "Iger's statement," wrote Earl Hutchinson, "was a trial balloon to see what, if any, public reaction there is to that prospect."[4] As in 1970, the studio initially announced *Song of the South* was to be permanently withdrawn, which only—intentionally or otherwise—increased demand for the film. On the heels of a sixteen-year withdrawal, *Song of the South* then opened to its biggest box office yet. Who knows how the film would perform now on the heels of an absence spanning nearly three decades?

The idea that Disney has "banned" its own film is misleading; in fact, the company has taken an extremely *passive* attitude. J. P. Telotte notes, "Disney's uncharacteristic reluctance in this case [of *Song of the South*] to

profit from its past—or even to prosecute those who do." [5] They have not rereleased it, yet they also do not aggressively pursue illegal appropriations of it either. Unlike in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the corporation does not need to promote the film's absence. Disney fandom does the job already, making it easier for the studio to figuratively wash its hands of the film. If Disney were to begin cracking down on the bootlegs and websites, such behavior would only do exactly what the company does not want at the moment—to draw excessive attention back to *Song of the South*. It would also alienate those devoted followers who, knowingly or otherwise, participate in Disney's default marketing strategy.

Another major difference between now and forty years ago is that *Song of the South* is already readily available in various bootleg versions. With fans keeping the memory of the film alive, they are ensuring attention and publicity if the film is finally released. Yet given the existing ubiquity of such illegal copies already available, the total sales of DVDs might be underwhelming. But the lure of remastered digital prints, exclusive special features, and the "official" seal of approval would no doubt hook the all-consuming Disney fan always willing to spend more money on the latest novelty unlocked from the vault. But only time will tell—as it did in 1972—if such a strategy indeed comes to pass.

If the history of the company's clever distribution strategies has taught us anything over the years, it's that there is little doubt *Song of the South* will return yet again. Cult fan followers who fondly remember the film as a child, as recently as the 1980s, are not going anywhere anytime soon. Nor is there any reason to think future reactions will be any less eclectic than those responses in the past. Moreover, talking only about people who last saw the film in theaters twenty years ago overlooks the hypothetical child somewhere today watching a scratchy bootleg, possibly even with Japanese subtitles. It was purchased online by Dad, Grandma, or some other family member—that lifelong Disney fanatic who first saw the film three or four decades ago, and who is now convinced that future generations will experience something similar. There is no reason to believe that the film's viewership is necessarily dwindling. The longer the film remains out of circulation, yet the more people write about its absence, the more intense *Song of the South*'s visibility is likely to be when it finally reemerges.

Song of the South is a complicated Hollywood text with contradictory legacies. To say anything more specific risks shutting down dialogue that the film can and should provoke, in favor of reductive solutions. Its reappearance would only work if it provoked a genuine debate that avoided

easy platitudes. Fans develop attachments for reasons (i.e., divorce) that are sometimes irreducible to others (i.e., race)—even if ultimately both can be mutually reaffirming in a negative way. Dialogue is important. Yet the need for rhetorical consensus and compromise—linear, historical narratives of progress or regression—is overrated. There's nothing wrong with saying that disagreements should be allowed to coexist. Resolutions, in contrast, are a tricky matter. We should be wary of compromises or pronouncements. Premature statements, such as Leonard Maltin's in 1984 that *Song of the South* had "survived a period of acute racial sensitivity,"[6] bleed too quickly into master narratives, where one side is conveniently silenced or simply ignored. Criticisms and defenses of *Song of the South* are mutually constitutive anyway. One never exists without the other. Critics attack the film because of its perceived (or possible) success; fans defend the film because others attack it. And then the cycle begins again. One exists in a discursive void without the provocation and presence of the other. Even then, such a binary is too simplistic. There remain still other approaches and responses to the film, beyond the boundaries of the present project.

In the possible future event of *Song of the South*'s official rerelease, many critics, audiences, and scholars (including this one) would forcefully restate why the film was so problematic to begin with—a criticism that has been in place since the film was first released in 1946. The difference now is that the film's fans are the most motivated party in the debate, since it has been kept out of circulation for so long. In the 1940s, however, the most motivated group was the film's critics, who were appalled that it had even been made. Today, *that* outrage has long since passed. In a "post-racial" United States that is as evasive on the persistent issue of race as it is reactionary, such widespread progressive conditions are unlikely to return anytime soon. Some resistance has periodically returned with rereleases, but then passed yet again. As time passes, it becomes increasingly difficult to *see*, in more ways than one, how *Song of the South* was *always* problematic. Contrary to what some prominent supporters (such as Jim Hill) believe, the film's disrespect to African American communities and white progressives was not just a phenomenon cooked up in the politically correct 1990s by a bunch of elite white California liberals. In whatever venue, *Song of the South* has always been deeply controversial. It is *that* initial history of the notorious Disney film that has been forgotten today.

For this reason and others, *Song of the South* should be released. While I personally find the film offensive, its absence on many levels

only fuels its most conservative fandom. People should be allowed to see the film for themselves. Fans should be allowed to enjoy the film as they do—to relive their own childhoods, and to pass their childhoods on to their children. But critics should also be allowed to continue to articulate why the film is so offensive, with the text readily available in circulation as corroborating evidence. More important are the fans of the film, and of Disney, who fondly remember *Song of the South* from their childhood, *and* who could see the film today from a more mature perspective. They could, on the one hand, warmly relive fond memories and immerse themselves in the affect of nostalgia. There is nothing necessarily wrong with wanting to go back to the past for a moment once in awhile. But they would also be strong enough *not* to ignore the issues that others see in the film. No Hollywood text is simple—and *Song of the South* is no different.

For both critics and fans, the reality is that *Song of the South* is a much more interesting and provocative film when people *cannot* see it. The infamous Disney film is not fascinating because some think it's a masterpiece waiting to be discovered. Nor is it fascinating because others think it's another offensive Hollywood representation of race relations. *Song of the South* is fascinating because of how often, and in what ways, the film's controversies have been exposed, paradoxically, in the process of being concealed. Hence releasing the film again would bring the film *back from* the realm of myth, where it has been built up into so much more than it really is. Rereleasing *Song of the South* would be appropriately anticlimactic. What else then would fans have to fight for, other than its interpretation? The drive to force Disney to rerelease the film is, after all, not really a fight for access. It is a fight for the cultural and social legitimacy that some fans would feel when vindicated by a hypothetical rerelease of the film. Fans could feel that *Song of the South* had overcome its criticisms, surviving that period of "acute racial sensitivity." Yet the historical irony in that statement should force one to look ahead with wary eyes. The real history of the film serves as a cautionary sign to any fan who would be anxious to make grand pronouncements about *Song of the South*'s timelessness.

Controversy keeps the film alive. But indifference will one day catch up with *Song of the South*. The appearance of any such legitimacy or approval would come with a price: there would be less to fight for. Fans would also discover that there is *not* a mass of moviegoers out there waiting to discover and adore the cult film. Once the novelty's appeal wore off, so too would the film's. As a cultural and historical object, *Song of*

the South is a deeply fascinating case study in the relationship between race and convergence. As a way to spend an hour and a half, however, it is still the same film the *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther trashed in 1946. *Song of the South* is an unevenly acted, slowly paced, overly sentimental, and quite derivative melodrama. It is not even redeemed by the few cartoons arbitrarily thrown in, which hardly stand out as among the best animated work Disney ever did anyway.

By preserving only the music and animation from the film over the last sixty years, Disney was not only editing the racism out of the film. The company was also preserving the only parts of *Song of the South* that hadn't aged as poorly, and thus still would be marketable to the largest possible audience. At best, there would be a considerable number of curiosity seekers if the film were rereleased. Many otherwise-uninterested audiences would also see for themselves just how "dated" much of the film really is. Others still would find the film neither enjoyable nor offensive—they would just be extremely *bored*. Films from the 1940s do not easily translate to general audiences today—even the best of them (an aesthetic category in which *Song of the South* does not belong regardless). The film will not disappear as long as it is stored in the vault. But in the near future, *Song of the South* could eventually fade away right out in the open.

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Appendix   T I M E L I N E   F O R   *S O N G   O F   T H E*
S O U T H   A N D   I T S   P A R A T E X T S

Below is a list of representative events in the history of *Song of the South*'s recirculation and repurposing. It begins with events preceding the film's first theatrical appearance in 1946 and traces its presence up to its availability on YouTube in 2008. It is also important to note that almost every one of these media texts lingered long past their initial release date—whether as a handed-down book or record, a television episode in reruns, a film that goes viral online, and so forth.

1945   Disney's "Uncle Remus" comic strip first appears (and runs until the mid-1970s)

1946   "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" appears on *Variety*'s list of "Top 30" radio songs, before the film is even released
Grosset and Dunlap produces two *Song of the South*–related books: *The Wonderful Tar Baby* and *Brer Rabbit Rides the Fox*
Song of the South premieres in Atlanta

1947   Capitol Records releases *The Tales of Uncle Remus* on LP
First Golden Book, *Walt Disney's Uncle Remus Stories*, appears
First "Little" Golden Book, *Walt Disney's Uncle Remus*, debuts
Capitol Records rereleases *The Tales of Uncle Remus*

1948   Disney short *Soup's On* features Donald Duck singing "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah"

1951   Golden Book and Record *Brer Rabbit and the Laughing Place* released

1952   Capitol Records releases *Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby*, *Brer Rabbit's Laughing Place*, and *Brer Rabbit Runs Away* on LP

1954   Clip from *Song of the South* appears on the premiere episode of *Disneyland* on ABC

1955   Disneyland Records releases *Uncle Remus*
Golden Book and Record *Brer Rabbit and the Laughing Place* rereleased
Song of the South appears on another episode of *Disneyland*, "A Cavalcade of Songs"

1956   Golden Book *Walt Disney's Uncle Remus Stories* is rereleased
        Walt Disney's Uncle Remus (Little Golden Book) reappears
        Disneyland devotes an entire episode to promoting *Song of the South*
        ("A Tribute to Joel Chandler Harris")
        Song of the South's first theatrical reissue
1962   Capitol Records rereleases *The Tales of Uncle Remus* for the second
        time
1969   "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" becomes a regular feature in the opening cred-
        its of NBC's *Wonderful World of Disney*
1971   *Walt Disney's Uncle Remus* (Little Golden Book) reappears again
1972   *Song of the South*'s second theatrical reissue
1974   Disneyland Records releases the read-along record and book *Brer Rab-
        bit and the Tar Baby*
        Disneyland Books releases *Walt Disney's Brer Rabbit and His Friends*
1974   Ralph Bakshi's *Song of the South*–inspired satire *Coonskin* is dropped
        by Paramount
1975   Capitol Records rereleases *The Tales of Uncle Remus* for a third time
        Coonskin finally receives a brief theatrical distribution through Bryan-
        ston Pictures
1977   The Golden Book *Uncle Remus Brer Rabbit Stories* reappears
        Disney releases *Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby* on Super 8mm film
        Saturday Night Live first references *Song of the South* in a comedic
        skit featuring the civil rights leader Julian Bond
        Disneyland Records releases *Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby* in audio-
        cassette form
1980   *Song of the South*'s third theatrical reissue
1983   *National Lampoon's Vacation* appears from Warner Bros.
1984   *Splash* is released by Touchstone, featuring a scene of Tom Hanks
        singing "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah"
1986   *Disney's Sing Along Songs* VHS tape, featuring "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-
        Dah," first appears
        Song of the South's fourth and final reissue
1987   MGM's *Overboard* features a brief moment of Kurt Russell singing
        "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah"
        Julius Lester publishes first "modern" literary version of *The Tales of
        Uncle Remus*
1988   *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* is released by Touchstone
1989   Splash Mountain opens in Disneyland in Anaheim
        "Ernest Goes to Splash Mountain" appears on ABC
        Warner Bros. releases *Fletch Lives*, which features a musical sequence
        parodying "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah"
1990   *Disney's Sing Along Songs* VHS tape "Disneyland Fun," featuring a
        new Splash Mountain version of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," appears

1992   *Disney's Sing Along Songs* volume 11 VHS tape, featuring "How Do
        You Do?," appears
        Splash Mountain opens in Walt Disney World in Orlando
1995   *Classic Disney* CD, featuring "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," is released
1996   Patti Austin's cover of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" appears on *Disney's Mu-
        sic from the Park*
2000   *Saturday Night Live* parody "Uncle Jemima's Pure Mash Liquor" is
        first broadcast
2001   *Disney's Greatest* CD, featuring "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," is released
2004   Bret Lott's short story *"Song of the South"* is published in the *Georgia
        Review*
2005   *Disney's Sing Along Songs*, "Disneyland Fun," is released to DVD
2006   Hannah Montana (Miley Cyrus) records a cover of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-
        Dah" that appears on *Disneymania 4*
        The Adventures of Brer Rabbit, based on Lester's books, is released by
        Universal direct-to-DVD; some fans confuse it with *Song of the South*
        Saturday Night Live parody "Journey to the Disney Vault" is first
        broadcast
2008   *Song of the South* is uploaded by an anonymous fan in its entirety as
        separate ten-minute clips on YouTube

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NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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2. Ibid., 6–7.

3. Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 155.

4. Patricia Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor, 1994), 108.

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7. Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

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11. Peggy Russo, "Uncle Walt's Uncle Remus: Disney's Distortion of Harris's Hero," *Southern Literary Journal* 25.1 (1992): 27.

12. "Big Rental Films of 1972," *Variety* (3 January 1973), 7.

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14. "All-Time Film Rental Champs," *Variety* (14 January 1981), 52.

15. "All-Time Film Rental Champs," *Variety* (13 January 1982), 54.

16. "All-Time Film Rental Champs," *Variety* (20 January 1988), 29.

17. "Godfather: & Rest of Pack," *Variety* (3 January 1973), 7.

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21. See, most recently, Douglas Brode, *From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Eleanor Byrne, *Deconstructing Disney* (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 1999); Henry A. Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999); Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, eds., *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995); Annalee Ward, *Mouse Morality: The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); and Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001).

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30. Ibid.

31. Ron Wise, "Disney Shelves Big Coin Film," *Variety* (25 February 1970), 20.

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33. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where New and Old Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

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44. Jacob Smith, *Spoken Word: Postwar American Phonograph Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 8.

45. See, for example, Michael Wallace, "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World," *Radical History Review* 32 (March 1985): 32–57; and Giroux, *Mouse That Roared.*

46. Haskell, *Frankly, My Dear*, x.

47. The bootleg versions are often copies of the movie from Europe and Asia, where Disney did release the full-length version to home video markets.

CHAPTER 1

1. Bernard Wolfe, "Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit," *Commentary* 8 (1949): 41.

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from World War II to the Civil Rights Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

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  23. Watts, *Magic Kingdom*, 79.

  24. Nicholas Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930–1960* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 14.

  25. Ibid., 78.

  26. Molly Haskell, *Frankly, My Dear: "Gone with the Wind" Revisited* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 14–15.

  27. "All-Time Box Office Champs," *Variety* (3 January 1973), 30. By the end of 1972, *The Godfather* had already earned $81.5 million, compared to *Gone with the Wind*'s $77 million. This, of course, does not include inflation.

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Don't: How Disney Do's That Old Time Derision," in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 89.

30. Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 432. For historical information on *Song of the South*, I rely heavily on the exhaustive research detailed in Gabler's recent book—not insignificantly because he is one of the few writers to be allowed access to the studio archives, which perhaps explains Gabler's generously sympathetic hagiography of the studio chief.

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CHAPTER 3

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78. Martin, "The Wonderful, Lovable, Universal, Wholesome World of Walt Disney," L4.

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CHAPTER 4

1. Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 22.

2. As quoted in Michael Wallace, "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World," *Radical History Review* 32 (March 1985): 35.

3. Wallace, "Mickey Mouse History," 52.

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5. Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 6. Jeffords here engages with the work of George Mosse.

6. Gray, *Watching Race*, 17–18.

7. Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 113.

8. Quoted in Lou Cannon, "GOP: A New *Song of the South*," *Washington Post* (31 December 1974), A10.

9. Gray, *Watching Race*, 16.

10. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 69.

11. The same sensitivity to this demographic, ironically, had also been a central reason why *Song of the South* stayed out of circulation as long as it had.

12. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 70–71.

13. Michael Gillespie, "Significations of Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of a Black Film" (PhD diss., New York University, 2007), 27.

14. Using research left over from the current project, I am presently finishing

an article that looks more closely at *Coonskin*'s reception during 1974 and 1975, tentatively titled, "Brer Rabbit with a Switchblade: Blaxploitation, the Politics of Representation, and the Reception of Ralph Bakshi's *Coonskin*." It is scheduled to appear in a forthcoming collection of essays on the legacy of Bakshi's film.

15. Kevin Thomas, "Movies," *Los Angeles Times* (3 June 1973), Q73.

16. Joseph M. Bloom, "Cheaper 'Adult' Films," *Los Angeles Times* (17 February 1972), D6. One cannot help but wonder how Bloom came to know the cost of admission to X-rated films.

17. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 104.

18. Ibid., 83–84.

19. Arthur Cooper, "Color It Black," *Newsweek* (18 August 1975), 73.

20. Leonard Maltin, *The Disney Films*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crown, 1984), 78. I argue that Maltin's book represents an industry point of view of *Song of the South* because of Maltin's close ties to the Walt Disney Corporation. While *Disney Films* was not an official Disney product, Maltin himself would eventually align himself professionally with the studio. Maltin begins the book by describing himself as follows: "Once upon a time there was a writer who wanted to do a list of Walt Disney's films. . . . He dreamed of expanding the list into a book-length study of Disney films" (vii). Needing access to the company archives, Maltin himself admits in the book's preface that "obviously, this book could not have been done without the cooperation of the Walt Disney organization" (viii), suggesting that he consciously crafted a Disney-friendly, perhaps even Disney-influenced, perception of the films, including *Song of the South*.

21. Leonard Maltin, *The Disney Films*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown, 1973), 78. The organization of Maltin's discussion of the film mirrors Douglas Brode's discussion of the same subject matter thirty years later in *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*, down to some of the same critics and quotations. This suggests that Maltin's popular coffee table book may have been the extent of Brode's problematic historical research in defense of the film—doubly ironic, given that Maltin's sources included quoting a Disney spokesperson who was quoting an African American film reviewer, the *Pittsburgh Courier*'s Herman Hill, from 1946.

22. Maltin, *Disney Films*, 1st ed., 78.

23. Ibid. (emphasis mine).

24. Maltin, *Disney Films*, 2nd ed., 78 (emphasis mine).

25. Tom Shales, "Blacks in Movies: Seeking the Human Dimension," *Washington Post* (10 September 1975), B4.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid. Shales did not mention which "black celebrities" did not find the notorious *Amos 'n' Andy* offensive.

28. Ibid.

29. Maltin, *Disney Films*, 2nd ed., 78.

30. Haynes Johnson, "Eyes Shut, Clock Unwound, Seeking Shelter in Shades of the Past," *Washington Post* (30 November 1980), A3.

31. Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

32. Jason Sperb, "Islands of Detroit/Affect, Nostalgia and Whiteness," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 49.2 (2008): 183–201.

33. Ibid., 198.

34. Ed Pearl, "*Song of the South* Wrap-Up," *Venice Beachhead* 135 (March 1981), accessed 27 May 2008, http://www.virtualvenice.info/print/bhinstitutions .htm.

35. "Letters to the Editor: *Song of the South* Debasement of Blacks," *Los Angeles Times* (10 January 1981), B4.

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37. David C. Phillips, "Does Affirmative Action Work?," *Los Angeles Times* (15 January 1981), A14.

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40. Ibid.

41. "Fox Features Fascist Flick," *Venice Beachhead* 134 (February 1981), accessed 27 May 2008, http://www.virtualvenice.info/print/bhinstitutions.htm.

42. Ibid.

43. Apparently, according to an insert titled "Racist Film Withdrawn! Community Celebrates!," however, the Fox Theatre withdrew *Song of the South* as a result of complaints even before the issue of the *Venice Beachhead* hit newsstands. (The controversial film was replaced by another reissued Disney film, *Lady and the Tramp*.)

44. "Fox Features Fascist Flick."

45. Pearl, "*Song of the South* Wrap-Up."

46. Ibid.

47. "Letter to the Editor," *Venice Beachhead* 135 (March 1981), accessed 27 May 2008, http://www.virtualvenice.info/print/bhinstitutions.htm.

48. "Fox Features Fascist Flick."

49. "Letter to the Editor."

50. Thomas Pleasure, "*Song of the South*: A Fascist Film?," *Los Angeles Times* (2 August 1981), L46. It is unclear here exactly what or whom he is citing, as the quoted phrases "racist to the core" and "natives" do not appear anywhere in the relevant *Beachhead* articles. Possibly he was citing the pamphlets that the group (which he incorrectly labels the "Coalition Against Racism") distributed in front of the Fox Theatre at the *Song of the South* protest.

51. Ibid.

52. Ron Finney, "*Song of the South* Again Sings Its Debasement of Blacks," *Los Angeles Times* (2 January 1981), C5.

53. Ibid.

54. "Letters to the Editor: *Song of the South* Debasement of Blacks," B4.

55. Ibid.

56. James Combs, *The Reagan Range: The Nostalgic Myth in American Culture* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1993), 44.

57. Ibid., 45.

58. Maltin, *Disney Films*, 1st ed., 78.

59. "Letters to the Editor: *Song of the South* Debasement of Blacks," B4. A private citizen writing to the *Times*, Coates is a self-identified black woman; the discourse of whiteness is not inherent to one race or another, but operates in part whenever race is denied as a cultural factor or even valid category of identification.

60. Pleasure, "*Song of the South*: A Fascist Film?"

61. James Snead, "Commentary: *Song* Not Ended for Disney," *Los Angeles Times* (27 December 1986), 1.

62. Charles Solomon, "Animation Sings in '*Song of the South*,'" *Los Angeles Times* (21 November 1986), OC E6.

63. "Fox Features Fascist Flick."

64. Snead, "Commentary," 1. Much of the material on *Song of the South* that he wrote in December 1986 would eventually evolve into a chapter of his book *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (New York: Routledge, 1994), an early addition to the field of racial stereotypes and representation in the cinema.

65. Snead, "Commentary," 1.

66. Hugh Keenan, "Twisted Tales: Propaganda in the Tar-Baby Stories," *Southern Quarterly* 22.2 (1984): 54–69.

67. Douglas Kermode, "Truth in Disney's *Song*," *Los Angeles Times* (4 January 1987), 74.

68. Ibid.

69. "Letters to the Editor: *Song of the South* Debasement of Blacks," B4.

70. Ibid.

71. "Letter to the Editor."

72. Charlotte Libov, "Movie Theater Is Back in Mainstream," *New York Times* (25 January 1987), CN2.

CHAPTER 5

1. Paul Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 53.

2. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 63.

3. Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

4. Grainge, *Brand Hollywood*, 48.

5. Jason Isaac Mauro, "Disney's Splash Mountain: Death Anxiety, the Tar Baby, and Rituals of Violence," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 22.3 (1997): 115.

6. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 171.

7. Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

8. Douglas Gomery, "Disney's Business History: A Reinterpretation," in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin (New York: Routledge, 1994), 79.

9. Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 32.

10. Grainge, *Brand Hollywood*, 56.

11. Quoted in Beth Dunlap, *Building a Dream: The Art of Disney Architecture* (New York: Abrams, 1996), 53.

12. Mary Ann Galante, "In Search of a New Magic Splash Mountain," *Los Angeles Times* (18 June 1988), 5.

13. Michael Eisner, with Tony Schwartz, *Work in Progress* (New York: Random House, 1998), 210.

14. Snead, "Commentary: *Song* Not Ended for Disney," *Los Angeles Times* (27 December 1986), 1.

15. Mary Ann Galante, "Disneyland to Offer Ride with Lots of Zip (a-Dee-Doo-Dah)," *Los Angeles Times* (30 January 1987), 1.

16. Ibid. (emphasis mine).

17. Ibid.

18. Kim Masters, *The Keys to the Kingdom* (New York: Harper, 2000), 181.

19. Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 171 (emphasis mine).

20. Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity*, 5.

21. Ibid., 28–30 (emphasis mine).

22. Dunlap, *Building a Dream*, 50.

23. Karal Ann Marling, "Imagineering the Disney Theme Parks," in *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance*, ed. Karal Ann Marling (New York: Flammarion, 1997), 83, 80, 79, 83.

24. Ibid., 85 (emphasis mine).

25. Galante, "In Search of a New Magic Splash Mountain," 5.

26. Michael Sorkin, "See You in Disneyland," in *Variations of a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 207.

27. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

28. Michael Billig, "Sod Baudrillard! Or Ideology Critique in Disney World," in *After Postmodernism*, ed. Herbert Simons and Michael Billig (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 151.

29. Project on Disney, *Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

30. Karen Klugman, "Under the Influence," in ibid., 105.

31. "Thrilling 'Splash Mountain' Attraction to Be Unveiled This Summer at Disneyland," Splash Mountain press release, Walt Disney Company Publicity Department (1988).

32. Ibid.

33. "Splash Mountain Disneyland California Ride Through," *YouTube* (15 September 2005), accessed 16 September 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGd0PNz636A.

34. "Splash Mountain POV," *YouTube* (10 November 2007), accessed 16 September 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dr7CqJmCCyI&feature=related.

35. "Splash Mountain Tribute," *YouTube* (7 February 2008), accessed 16 September 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRbgBy7Vg5U&feature=related.

36. "Splash Mountain at Disneyworld Shot in High Definition," *YouTube* (16 January 2008), accessed 16 September 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYHaUilaN7w&feature=related.

37. Ibid.

38. "Splash Mountain in Magic Kingdom," *YouTube* (17 December 2007), accessed 16 September 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgBPrdwSxj0&feature=related.

39. "Splash Mountain at Disneyworld Shot in High Definition."

40. Klugman, "Under the Influence," 104 (emphasis mine).

41. "Splash Mountain Disneyland California Ride Through."

42. Klugman, "Under the Influence," 105.

43. Eisner, *Work in Progress*, 211.

44. "Man Dies in Fall at Disney World," *CNN* (5 November 2000), accessed 12 October 2011, http://archives.cnn.com/2000/US/11/05/disney.death/index.html.

45. Brady MacDonald, "Safety Concerns for Disneyland's Splash Mountain," *Los Angeles Times* (18 January 2008), http://qa.travel.latimes.com/daily-deal-blog/index.php/safety-concerns-for—1235/.

46. "Splash Mountain," *Retroland* (nd), accessed 6 September 2009, http://www.retroland.com/pages/retropedia/places/item/6302/.

47. Laura Kiernan, "The Tune of $10 Million," *Washington Post* (1 May 1980), F9. I cannot find any reference to the resolution of the lawsuit.

48. "New Name Gives Duda Wonderful Day," *Los Angeles Times* (27 June 1987), 29.

49. The film has been released in full-length form on VHS and laser disc in Europe and Japan, which in turn fueled the bootleg market back in the United States.

50. "Disney's Sing-A-Long Songs—Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah [VHS]," Amazon (nd), accessed 5 September 2009, http://www.amazon.com/Disneys-Sing-Long -Songs-Doo-Dah/dp/6300276554/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=video&qid=1252 171013&sr=8-1. Not surprisingly, many fans also use this platform to advocate for *Song of the South*'s rerelease, an issue I explore in the final chapter, on Disney Internet fandom.

51. John Hughes, "Vacation '58," Bizbag.com (nd), accessed 5 September 2009, http://www.bizbag.com/Vacation/Vacation%2058.htm. The article originally appeared in the September 1979 issue of *National Lampoon*.

52. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic, 2001), 351.

53. Peggy Russo, "Uncle Walt's Uncle Remus: Disney's Distortion of Harris's Hero," *Southern Literary Journal* 25.1 (1992): 20.

54. Michael Cieply and Charles Solomon, "Disney 'Rabbit' Hops into the Spotlight," *Los Angeles Times* (13 April 1988), 1.

55. Ibid.

56. Patricia Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor, 1994), 114.

57. Ibid., 115.

58. Ibid., 116.

59. Mike Brantley, "*Song of the South*," *Alabama Mobile Register* (1 January 2002), accessed January 13, 2012, http://www.songofthesouth.net/news/archives /mobileregister.html.

CHAPTER 6

1. Earl Hutchinson, "Disney Sings Dollars and Racism with *Song of the South*," *Miami Times* (22 May 2007), 3A.

2. As quoted in Donald Liebenson, "Should 'Dated' Films See the Light of Today? '*Song of the South*' Fans Want Disney to Release Its Ode to 'Uncle Remus,'" *Los Angeles Times* (7 May 2003), E4 (my emphasis).

3. Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

4. J. P. Telotte, "*Song of the South*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 27.5 (2010): 392.

5. Scott Schaffer, "Disney and the Imagineering of Histories," *Postmodern Culture* 6.3 (1996): http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/postmodern_culture /v006/6.3schaffer.html.

6. Hollis Henry, "Song of a Never-Was South: Will Disney Re-release a Twisted Film?," *Black Commentator* 139 (19 May 2005): www.blackcommentator .com/139/139_south.html.

7. Sara Gwenllian-Jones, "The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters," *Screen* 43.1 (2002): 80.

8. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where New and Old Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 247.

9. Ibid., 256 (emphasis mine).

10. Ibid., 184.

11. Jonathan Gray, "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6.1 (2003): 64–81.

12. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 247.

13. Ibid., 204.

14. Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 105.

15. Steven Cohan, "Judy on the Net: Judy Garland Fandom and 'the Gay Thing' Revisited," in *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*, ed. Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo (New York: Routledge, 2001), 135. As Cohan notes, "Whatever demographic picture results [from online research] includes only those people who have access to the web and an inclination—not to say education, leisure time, and income—to use it" (120). This also applies to my research on what fans have posted regarding *Song of the South*'s various controversies, which does not intend to be exhaustive. I do believe, however, that the comments are fair representations of what fans say on the Internet.

16. Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 217–218.

17. Gwenllian-Jones, "Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters," 82.

18. Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 90.

19. Liebenson, "Should 'Dated' Films See the Light of Today?," E4.

20. Quoted in ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1.

24. Susan Miller and Greg Rode, "The Movie You See, the Movie You Don't: How Disney Do's That Old Time Derision," in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 88.

25. Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 25.

26. Ibid., 18.

27. Susan Willis, "The Problem with Pleasure," in Project on Disney, *Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 1–11.

28. James Snead, *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

29. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic, 2001), xii, xvi, xiv.

30. Matthew Bernstein, "Nostalgia, Ambivalence, Irony: *Song of the South* and Race Relations in 1946 Atlanta," *Film History* 8.2 (1996): 219–236.

31. Miller and Rode, "The Movie You See, the Movie You Don't," 86.

32. Nicholas Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930–1960* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

33. Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 351.

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36. "Racism in Disney," *YouTube* (2007), accessed 25 April 2009, http://www .youtube.com/watch?v=LibK0SCpIkk&feature=related; "Is This Racist? *Song of the South* clip," *YouTube* (2007), accessed 2 September 2008, http://www .youtube.com/watch?v=47ak4vjiNzw.

37. "Walt Disney's *Song of the South*," *YouTube* (2008), accessed 24 July 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrAKhHcZM-Y. At the time of the latest revision, the entire film was still available.

38. "Bobby Driscoll in '*Song of the South*'—1946," *YouTube* (2007), accessed 2 September 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1ZvPBHCiBw. This clip was eventually pulled from the site.

39. "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah," *YouTube* (24 July 2007), accessed 30 December 2001, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcxYwwIL5zQ.

40. "Uncle Remus' "Wonderful Tar Baby Story," *YouTube* (2007), accessed 2 September 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xiuZQxYR9uU.

41. Quoted in Jaime Weinman, "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Don't Mention It," *Maclean's* (14 May 2007), 63.

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43. Merlin Jones, "In Defense of Disney's Uncle Remus," Song of the South .net (21 January 2005), accessed 31 July 2008, http://www.songofthesouth.net/news /archives/savedisney-indefense.html.

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45. Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 18.

46. Ibid.

47. Douglas Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 61–62.

48. Ibid., 61.

49. Ibid., 256.

50. Victor Burgin, *The Remembered Film* (London: Reaktion, 2004).

51. Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*, 256.

52. Bernstein, "Nostalgia, Ambivalence, Irony," 231.

53. Bill Vaughn, "My Year in the Dark: Song of the South Isn't the Greatest Film Ever Made, but It's the One I'll Never Forget," *Reports from the Dark Acres* (2006), accessed 16 May 2008, http://darkacres.com/SongOfSouth_jump .html.

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55. Vaughn, "My Year in the Dark."

56. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.

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2. Mike Clark, "Now on DVD," *USA Today* (1 February 2008), 6D.

3. Weinman, "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Don't Mention It," 63.

4. Earl Hutchinson, "Disney Sings Dollars and Racism with *Song of the South*," *Miami Times* (22 May 2007), 3A.

5. J. P. Telotte, *"Song of the South," Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 27.5 (2010): 392.

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INDEX